

Mirage of Blaze: Ultramarine

Kuwabara Mizuna

Ultramarine Prologue: The Sea to Which He Cannot Return

He hears the rippling of waves.

"Look well, Saburou. That is the sea of the Houjou.

Engrave it in thy mind's eye, that thou wilt ever call it to mind when thou dost close thine eyes.

This is thine homeland. Thou needst not withhold thyself, for this sea will ever wait here for thee."

"..."

"Come home at any time, Saburou."

"Ujiteru-ani."

"Ujiteru-ani and 'Kuni and 'Nori... All of us will be waiting for thee.

If anything chance to cause thee affliction in [Echigo](#) ,

*I will thither straight to thine aid, there to kidnap thee if I must
and bring thee home again. Therefore be easy of mind and go forth
with
strong heart.*

Forget not that thy brothers' hearts are with thee always."

"Ujiteru-ani, I think thou wouldst melt even the snows of [Mikuni Pass](#) ."

"Ha! Forsooth, I would melt all the snows of [Echigo](#) ."

"Hahahah, I look forward to't."

"'Tis no boast. Have I ever lied to thee?"

"...[Aniue](#) ."

"Come back to us.

*Then we shall watch the twilight upon the [Sagami Sea](#) again together.
This I swear, Saburou.*

"Thank you...[Aniue](#) .

A midwinter snow falls at the seashore: pure white flakes melting in the sea
to which his brother never returned.

His promise still lies unforgotten in his heart. ...And so it will remain unto
eternity.

This I swear, Saburou.

Someday...

We will be together again.

Ultramarine Chapter 1: The Buried Legend

It was somewhat surprising that a place so verdant and lush still existed here, just an hour away from the heart of the city.

He took the bus from the [JR Takao Station](#) and got off at his destination around ten minutes later. The road became a rotary just past the bus stop at the foot of the mountains. The empty,

dilapidated buildings of a school, apparently abandoned, stood nearby.

Peering into a classroom from a broken window, he saw that the inside was as bleak and deserted as the outside suggested.

But the day was clear and bright, and warm enough that he was sweating after walking a short distance.

Located nearby were a couple of large city-managed cemeteries, rather out of proportion to the number of residences in the area. Perhaps they were popular locations due to their proximity to the city. He had passed quite a few shops selling flowers for grave visits on the way from the station. Several information plaques had caught his eye: they had apparently been placed in the graveyards more for the benefit of visitors than the repose of their tenants. —Speaking of which, wasn't the [Showa Emperor](#) 's [Musashino Imperial Mausoleum](#) also quite close?

A tiny river called Shiroyama River flowed along the road leading into the mountains. The young man who had

descended at the bus stop appeared to have come with the intention of going up the mountain, though he seemed rather lightly equipped for a

hiker.

Also odd was the brooding expression on his face, which even the refreshing wind failed to soften. He listened for a while to the murmur of the stream before finally setting out upstream.

The trees grew thick and riotous around him. The mountains here had been designated the [Takao-Jinba Natural Park](#) by the Metropolitan Government and was a familiar hiking spot for the

residents of Tokyo. The air was so clear that it was difficult for him to believe himself still in Tokyo. The breeze was refreshing and cool against his skin, and tickled his nose with the scents of earth and overflowing greenery.

"Are you going up to the castle?" a voice asked from behind as he stood reading the hiking trail information board at the administrative building , and the youth turned. A man in hiking gear, who looked with his peppered gray hair around sixty years of age, approached him with a good-natured smile.

"...I'd like to see the inner citadel at the summit."

"Is this your first time on this trail?"

The youth thought for a moment before answering, "Yes."

The middle-aged man's sun-tanned face wrinkled in a delighted chuckle.

"Perfect! In that case, why don't we go up together? I'd be happy to guide

you. I live around here, and I've been up to [Hachiouji Castle](#) a few times."

He appeared to be one of those people who liked to stick his nose into everybody's business. The youth bowed his head and replied with a white-toothed grin, "I would appreciate it."

The middle-aged man introduced himself as Shintani. He lived in [Moto-Hachiou Town](#) and ran a business inherited from his father. He also belonged to the

local History Research Society and was on his way to paying another visit to the [Hachiouji Castle](#) Ruins here on [Mt. Fukazawa](#) . His legs did indeed seem well-accustomed to the mountain trail.

"The ruins are from the [Sengoku](#) Era more than four hundred years ago. We have the administration

building and the bridge here now, and preservation work being done, but in the old days there was nothing here but the mountain. There weren't even many people who knew that the castle was here."

"This was the lord's mansion," Shintani continued, guiding the youth towards the path along the cliff. He seemed delighted at having met another visitor to [Hachiouji Castle](#) . "The lord's mansion was where the master of the castle lived. Since [Hachiouji Castle](#) was, as you can see, a mountain castle, the lord would go up to the

inner citadel at the summit during battles, but he normally lived at a mansion built at the foot of the mountain. Isn't this road just beautiful? They say it was the ancient road to the lord's mansion, and was recently rediscovered and reconstructed. The stone wall here was excavated as well, and parts of it were restored—pretty well, I

think—so that you can really get a sense of what it was like back then."

"I see..." The youth gazed around him, murmuring admiringly, "It seems almost too beautiful—enough to give a person goosebumps..."

"Sounds like you do some local history research of your own, eh?"

Though he didn't look student-age. —The youth smiled without responding.

"Are you also going up to [Hachiouji Castle](#) for research or something of the like, then?"

"...Well, I suppose you could call it that."

"Aha. It makes me very happy indeed that a young person would show such interest in something like this."

Strolling along the reconstructed ancient road ,

Shintani told the young man, "It was only given protection and maintenance recently. The situation before that was pretty awful. There were bulldozers in these foothills doing land reclamation work and running right over precious earthwork and ruins in the process without even knowing what they were. Priceless treasures, utterly destroyed."

Shintani's forehead creased with chagrin at the memory. "This [Hachiouji Castle](#) here is a perfect representation of the kind of mountain castles that were being built during the end of the Middle Ages—the end of the [Sengoku](#) .

They've even exhumed relics of high archaeological value from here, like white porcelain imported from Ming China. But for some reason this country has little desire to protect artifacts from that era. Oh, the

Administration certainly treats objects from the ancient tombs or from the [Joumon](#) , [Yayoi](#) Eras with lots of enthusiasm, but anything else... especially [Souson](#) relics from the [Muromachi Period](#) or these small castles...anything that's not going to attract throngs of tourists, they rarely try to preserve. They'll just let them go to waste after they've done their investigation."

"But..." the youth interjected with a wry smile, "...if they saved everything, then the towns won't have anywhere to expand. Japan would end up a mass of ancient ruins and nothing else."

"Well, that may be true, but the question is, how much knowledge are we destroying with these ruins? They are certainly very valuable to researchers, but because the Administration and public are not conscious of them or are not simply interested, those precious ruins are just run over. A lot more discussion is needed. How much will we come to regret it later? Those lost ruins can never be recovered. They're lost forever," Shintani said emphatically. "Happily, [Hachiouji Castle](#) is a little dearer to the public, and the Administration has put some effort into protecting it, but... now they're saying they want to put the [Ken'ou Expressway](#) at the bottom of this mountain. Just what the heck are they thinking? Geez..."

Standing on the recently-constructed wooden bridge, the youth gazed at the small waterfall upstream, listening to its splashing in silence.

At Shintani's urging, he turned towards the Tiger's Mouth, the entrance to the castle. This was where the stone walls had been restored to their original state and were in the best condition. Moss had once

grown in patches on the earth packed between the stones, and the masonry work typified the sort of construction done in the [Sengoku](#) . The rustic, rough look would disappear from castles of the [Edo Period](#) .

"[Hachiouji Castle](#) is truly a very interesting structure."

As they ascended the stone stairs toward the ruins of the lord's mansion, Shintani expounded on the theme with the sort of breathless pride of someone boasting about his hometown. "It was constructed in the [Tenshou Years](#) near the end of the [Sengoku](#) Era, and is an exemplary example of mountain castles built in that time period. The builder was [Houjou Ujiteru](#) , the third son of [Houjou Ujiyasu](#) ...though his eldest died so young that I guess you could say he was the second son. You know 'bout him?"

Grimacing, the youth made a vague sound of agreement.

"Ujiteru was adopted by the warlord [Ooishi-shi](#) , the head of a local clan—though when [Ooishi-shi](#) fell to the Houjou, Ujiteru took back the Houjou family name. [Ooishi-shi](#) turned [Takiyama Castle](#) over to him, and Ujiteru made it his primary fortress at first. But I guess it was hit hard in an attack by [Takeda Shingen](#) .

It got damaged pretty badly, and since the "fall" in the "waterfall" part of its name was inauspicious, Ujiteru decided to build a new castle here on [Mt. Fukazawa](#) . Have you heard of [Mt. Jinba](#) ? It's a mountain a bit further in, but it was given that name because Shingen camped there during his attack on [Takiyama Castle](#) ."

"Hmm...so it even became the mountain's name."

"Since this was the border between [Musashi](#) and [Kai](#) , it was the front line between Houjou and Takeda. Ujiteru was a very

skilled commander, and his brother relied on him quite heavily. He must have wanted a first-class castle here to be prepared for Takeda."

The two men came out onto a broad sports arena-like plateau where the mansion that was said to have belonged to [Houjou Ujiteru](#) had once stood. The youth stopped directly in its center, looking up and half-closing his eyes against the dazzling sunlight filtering through the forest crown above.

"People say that castles tell you what their masters were like, and I think it's true. Since Ujiteru was always fighting in one battle or another, he probably never had the time to simply enjoy staying at his castle, so you might have an image of him as some rustic boor—but in fact his life surprisingly elegant. They say he was an expert at the flute. And the white porcelains from China were beautiful, classy pieces—I've even found some shards myself during excavations, so I know."

The youth only stood upon the empty plain of what had once been the lord's mansion, gazing with deep emotion at the earth beneath his feet.

"I see... So they've found shards of white porcelain..."

"There's a small waterfall at the drop ahead," Shintani pointed. "It's called the Waterfall of the Lord's Mansion. Having a waterfall next to your house is pretty good taste, wouldn't you say? But this waterfall has a sad tale."

The youth looked over his shoulder at Shintani.

"It's from when [Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#) besieged the Houjou. This castle fell to a combined attack by [Maeda Toshiie](#) and [Uesugi Kagekatsu](#) from the Hideyoshi side. A lot of the women and girls killed themselves in this waterfall."

Shintani didn't notice the pain that creased the youth's brows at his words.

"...The story goes that the village folk downstream used the water flowing through here to wash their rice, and it stained the grains pure scarlet. So it became the custom around these parts to eat red rice on the day the castle fell in memorial to those who died."

"To...the women and girls who...killed themselves..."

"This castle's certainly seen its share of tragedy," Shintani muttered as if driven by the emotions from that distant past, buried even now beneath the soil. "A lot of the castle garrison died in that battle. This mountain's seen a lot of death."

The youth gritted his teeth, his lips compressed into a thin line. He stood with his head bowed and eyes tightly shut, his fists clenched so hard that they were bloodless.

"... What's wrong?" Shintani asked, concerned by his continued silence. The youth heard the question dimly through the soul-deep regret and sorrow darkening his eyes.

He quietly lifted his head and looked towards the mountain rising behind him.

Though Mt. Fukazawa on which Hachiouji Castle had been constructed wasn't, at 460 meters ^[1] above sea level, a very large mountain, it contained precipitous areas

that made forcing one's way through more difficult than one might expect. While the hiking trail reached the inner citadel at the summit, getting there without proper hiking gear was not an easy task.

Patches of sunlight pierced through the luxuriant forest. Conditioned as Shintani might be, he still had to watch his step carefully on the mountain road. The youth climbed step by firm, deliberate step.

Shintani continued to give a careful description for each ancient earthwork they passed along the way.

"Because of the fragments of weapons and armor found here, this place is thought to have been the site of a fierce battle," Shintani explained as he wiped sweat away with a towel. "The castle fell in a single day to the combined forces of Maeda Toshiie and Uesugi Kagekatsu . There were upwards of a thousand people killed."

Ujiteru and his chief commanders had been besieged at the Houjou main fortress of Odawara , and only a few of his old veterans had remained behind at the castle

with a garrison comprised almost wholly of countryfolk and itinerant monks.

But no matter how solid, how defensible the castle, the difference in

combat strength had been far too great. ...Under the furious attack of a combined army directed by Supreme Commander [Maeda Toshiie](#) , even the renowned [Hachiouji Castle](#) had fallen in just one day.

It had been a heroic battle, so the stories told.

The deaths were not one-sided; many in the attacking army fell, and [Maeda Toshiie](#) , too, wrote of a ferocious battle in his letters.

It had been an honorable defeat for the Houjou. Afterwards, the stench of corpses rotting in the summer heat had shrouded the entire area in foulness.

"This place has a lot of ghost stories, like how people from [Echigo](#) and [Kaga](#) would be killed by the angry spirits of the dead soldiers if they dared set foot on this mountain. Apparently you could hear the sounds of men and horses running about and screams in broad daylight, so the villagers called it the "Lamenting Mountain" and were afraid to go near it for a long time."

"...'Lamenting Mountain...'"

"Yep. And not just in ancient times, either. Even now you hear a lot of stories like that. There was this school called [Zokei University](#) at the foot of the mountains. It's moved now, but before that it was

famous for having the ghosts of warriors appearing on campus. There was

even a story about it on TV..."

"..."

"It's too bad... I guess they're still here on this mountain, unable to rest."

The youth was silent.

But during the course of Shintani's story, he seemed to put more force than necessary into his steps.

The two hikers finally arrived at the outer citadel. An ancient well, the 'pit well,' still remained, and even now the cool, refreshing water within could be drawn using the pump at its side.

"Let's take a breather here. The water from that well is delicious. The pump still works, so wait here for a sec," Shintani said, and took the path down.

The youth remained, alone in that place.

Trees rustled in the wind.

Standing in silence, he could feel the presences all around him.

When he closed his eyes, he could hear the echoes of voices from four hundred years ago: screams and bellows of rage loud enough to split the ground apart, the thundering footsteps of the great enemy army, sword clanging against sword, the sound of flesh being ripped apart, death agonies, howls and wailing.

He could smell the blood. Bowing his head, he opened his eyes to see it oozing like red oil out of the ground at his feet. Though the blood spread until it formed a pool as wide as a pond, he was neither

startled nor frightened. He crouched and touched it as it continued to seep out of the soil. The slippery scarlet liquid was warm to the touch and smelled of iron rust.

A presence approached the youth from behind. Then another. Still crouched, he waited for them to gather. There was the creaking of armor. The air cooled. They had felt his presence and had followed it here, one by one from all over the mountain as if drawn by it.

The youth stood slowly. He looked over the assembly and spoke to the one who stood immediately behind him:

"Kageyu..."

Shintani returned with water from the well a short while later.

"Sorry 'bout the wait. I got plen..."

Shintani gasped. His water bottle fell out of suddenly slack fingers a moment before he landed on his backside with a thump.

"Ah...waugh...waaah...!"

He couldn't get a word out. His mouth opened and closed repeatedly in a face twisted by fear and shock.

A crowd of warriors surrounded the youth.

<<Tono—...>> A voice spoke from the midst of the warriors. The youth looked directly, fearlessly at them.

"You have experienced much pain...Kageyu. All of you," the youth said quietly to the warriors. "Though much time has passed, you have not felt true peace. Your lord has now returned to you from [Odawara](#) ."

The paled-faced warriors shouted and rushed over to the youth. One after another, they sank to their knees before him. Though there was pain on the youth's face, he told them, still in those quiet tones, "Forgive me for having been away for so long. Even now you have held fast to the protection of this castle. ...You have my gratitude."

Some of the arrow-pierced, blood-covered warriors sobbed. Their heart-wrenched cries surged into one fierce wail.

<<Tono!!>>

<<Welcome back, Tono!!>>

<<Forgive us, Tono!>>

<<Forgive us for failing to protect the castle!!>>

The youth crouched once more and embraced the warriors clinging to him, clapping them over and over again on the back consolingly.

"Tis I who must ask pardon of you. For your bitterness, your regrets... You did well. Truly, truly well. Forgive me, everyone. Please find it in your hearts to forgive this Ujiteru here before you...!"

Shintani, still on the ground, could not get a word out.

The youth wept as he and the spirit warriors clung tightly to each other.

The wail of the countless number of spirits gathered in that place resounded from the mountain.

Their grief and anguish, their tears and sobs overflowed from the ruins of the fallen castle as they lamented the bitterness of their deaths, which had denied their souls nirvana. Reunited at last with their lord, returned to them after four hundred years, these ancient warriors poured out their long sorrow.

Ujiteru wept with them.

footnotes

[1] ~1509 feet

Ultramarine Chapter 2: People of the Lamenting Mountain

How

many people realize that the capital of Japan, now called the City of Tokyo, was ruled by the Houjou four hundred years ago? How many people

know that [Edo Castle](#) , today the location of the [Imperial Palace](#) , was once one of the Houjou branch castles?

But then again, that was when Edo had still been a backwater of the [Kantou](#) . Its blossoming started with the governance of [Tokugawa Ieyasu](#) after the destruction of the Houjou at [Odawara](#) . [Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#) bestowed their former territory, the eight [Kantou](#) provinces, upon Ieyasu in their entirety. Such largesse may seem a

tremendous honor, but was in fact no such thing for Ieyasu; the volatile and barely-controlled provinces of [Suruga](#) and [Tootoumi](#) , still full of hostile elements, were forcibly foisted on him.

Hideyoshi's decree commanding him to the small back-country branch castle at [Edo](#) certainly made it no easier.

Perhaps Hideyoshi was merely disinclined to be so foolish as to give up the famously impregnable [Odawara Castle](#) .

Another view theorizes that he wanted to develop Edo as a strategic vantage point from which he could keep an eye on the various warlords of the [Northeast](#) , [Date Masamune](#) among them; though they followed his commands, he could not afford to be less than vigilant.

In any case, these are the events that would lead to the province of [Musashi](#) becoming the capital of Japan.

With what deep emotion would the former rulers of this land view its current form? How would they feel when looking upon this city, flourishing beyond all imagination since their time?

When [Ujiteru](#) reached the foot of the mountain, it was already long past sunset.

He came to the administrative building at the start of the trail and noticed a familiar four-wheel drive parked there: a Mitsubishi Pajero. A tall man stepped out from the driver's side upon catching sight of Ujiteru.

His long hair, woven into a thin tail that reached almost to his waist, swayed against his back as he moved. His broad shoulders and muscular, lithe frame belied a first impression of slenderness.

"Ujiteru-dono," the man who had alighted from the Pajero called, and Ujiteru, recognizing him, sighed lightly.

"Kotarou..." He smiled wryly. "Thou hast come for me?"

This was [Fuuma Kotarou](#), leader of the Fuuma Clan, a clan of ninjas which had once been based on [Mt. Hakone](#) not far from [Odawara](#) and had served the Later Houjou Clan from the beginning.

"Thou knew'st well whither to seek me."

"It was Tsunashige-dono who told me."

"... Indeed. Thou hast come expressly to take me back, then?"

Kotarou was, as usual, completely expressionless. There were times when Ujiteru felt that he was talking not to a real person, but to a statue; when Kotarou spoke, not even the twitch of an eyebrow betrayed his thoughts.

"Please get in," he said in a low, carrying voice. He himself got back into the driver's seat. Ujiteru's lips twitched in another wry smile as he climbed into the passenger side.

Kotarou turned the key and started the engine. The seats vibrated as the car rumbled to life and slid smoothly forward. It made a U-turn and retraced its path along the river towards Takao Highway .

"What were you doing here?" Kotarou asked Ujiteru tersely. Ujiteru was still looking over his shoulder at the [Hachiouji Castle](#) Ruins fading into the distance.

His gaze fixed on the mountain castle, Ujiteru murmured, deep in reflection, "...Never did I imagine that I might set foot on this land again. Nor did I think to see the day when I might return to my castle... That I would lay mine eyes on them again..."

His voice caught, and his eyes, red with weeping, fell. After a moment he gave a tiny smile.

"—I thought they would surely hate me."

Kotarou's eyes remained fixed on the road far ahead. Ujiteru continued

as if speaking to himself, "Those who died in the battle, I thought they must all surely hate me. In sooth, I confess it terrified me to come here. The fall of the castle was my responsibility. The fault was mine. If I had been here at the castle...if I had fought along with them..."

'What ifs' could not change the past. If Ujiteru *had* commanded his troops at Hachiouji, would the outcome have been any different?

Though Ujiteru knew that such suppositions were foolish, he could not help but wonder.

"I cannot feign ignorance."

"..."

"Since that day at [Odawara](#) when I heard those evil tidings, I knew that I had to return...to

return no matter what. I had to apologize. To accept any punishment if such was to be my lot. 'Twas what I decided before coming here."

He had to ask forgiveness of those who had died at [Hachiouji Castle](#) — those who had fought for him. He had thought constantly of them until the very moment he committed ritual suicide by Hideyoshi's decree. And though he had regretted nothing, his last thought had been of the many people—so many people whose forgiveness he needed to implore.

So the resurrected Ujiteru had come back to [Hachiouji Castle](#) , prepared to take their regret and bitterness and carry them all on his own back.

And yet the soldiers of [Hachiouji Castle](#) had...

Rather than hating him or seeking to kill him, they had apologized to him. Had clung to him in tears and begged his forgiveness for failing to protect the castle. They had come to him, their lord returned after four hundred years, to bewail their regret and pain at being unable to pass to the next world.

They had clung to him, their tears falling without end as if their chests had been torn open by their long, long sorrow.

Overcome with emotion, he had wept with them.

What could he possibly do for them, the dead who had become onryou and made this mountain their haunting-place, whose soul-deep regret could not be eased no matter how many memorial services were performed for them?

The onryou had cried and howled their regret and bitterness until the mountain itself had resounded with their wailing.

Even Kotarou, waiting at the foot of the mountain, had heard it as heavy leaden clouds gathered above the mountain. The residents of the neighboring areas had shivered at the endless wails and howls from the mountain and shuttered and locked their houses tightly.

Clinging to Ujiteru, the onryou had poured out their centuries-deep bitterness.

"—I could do nothing..." Ujiteru confessed haltingly, despondently. "There was naught I could do but weep with them."

"..."

"'Twas arrogance...that made me think...I could make any redress."

Kotarou gave no indication that he was paying any attention, but Ujiteru knew that he was in fact listening very closely.

"Thou camest by command of mine uncle, didst thou not?" he asked. "To take me home."

"...You were aware, then?"

"Of that, at least. Mine uncle feared for me, I think."

By "uncle," Ujiteru was referring to [Houjou Tsunashige](#) , a member of the Houjou family and master of [Tamanawa Castle](#) . Son of [Kushima Masashige](#) , a vassal of the Imagawa Clan, he had escaped with his followers to [Odawara](#) after his father's death in battle at Takeda's hands. There he had been brought up by [Houjou Ujitsuna](#) , (Ujiyasu's father), who had adopted him as a son-in-law, making him Ujiyasu's brother-in-law.

He excelled in military affairs, and was renowned as a daring commander of the Houjou. Because his battle-flag bore the name of the god [Hachiman](#) on cloth the color of withered leaves, he was celebrated as the 'Yellow-Soil Hachiman ^[1]'.

To Ujiteru, he was also the esteemed uncle who had taught him so much about battle tactics and strategy. Ujiteru had been overwhelmed with joy upon hearing of Tsunashige's resurrection.

In actuality, he had told no one of his visit to [Hachiouji Castle](#) , not even his brother [Ujimasa](#) , for he had been resigned to the possibility of the castle

troops attacking him in their hatred—of not returning to [Odawara](#) .

Ujimasa would never have allowed him to go to such a dangerous place—which was why he had left without telling his brother. But in case anything should happen, he had decided to tell one person.

Tsunashige must have sent Kotarou immediately upon reading the note he had left in his uncle's room.

"...Thou wert with me, I think?" He asked, looking at Kotarou's profile. "'Twas thee following behind me when I entered the mountain."

This ability to mask their presence from even the one they guarded was a special technique of the ninja. If the soldiers had attacked Ujiteru, Kotarou would have used any means to save him.

"...'Twas unnecessary."

After a moment of silence, Kotarou replied, "You are a pillar of the Houjou, Ujiteru-dono. Yours is not an existence that can be allowed to be destroyed in such a place."

"And what meanest thou by 'such a place?'" Ujiteru demanded, raising his voice. "I will not allow thee to speak thusly! Think thee of the bitterness of the many soldiers who died here at [Hachiouji Castle](#) ! What blame to them if they should hate me? Dost thou know the pain they endured? The depth of the regret they bear? Or are such passions inconceivable to thee?!"

"..."

"A great part of those who died in that battle were not even samurai!
They were farmers, common people recruited to the defense of the castle...! We could have let everyone live in peace... Would that not have been the better choice? Surely 'twas what everyone wished for!"

Kotarou stepped lightly on the break with machine-like precision as the light turned red at an intersection. He looked at Ujiteru expressionlessly.

"Your possible death at the hands of those who hated you concerned you not. Think you the Houjou can achieve victory with such weak feelings, Ujiteru-dono?"

"...!"

"The past is past. Never will you be able to move forward if you are held thusly by past sentiments. Ujiteru-dono, you must reflect on your position and refrain from taking such rash action."

"Rash, Kotarou?" Ujiteru asked in a low, heavy voice. "Thou wouldst call my actions rash?"

"..."

He pushed his resentment at Kotarou's silence and blank, statue-like stare down into his chest and sank back into the seat, sighing deeply.
...He couldn't get through to this man. No matter what he said.

For this was certainly not the first time something like this had

happened. No matter how he tried to explain, to argue, he couldn't get through to Kotarou at all.

(Is it because he's a ninja...?)

Was it because he didn't understand human emotion (calculate as he might)?

(Is this what it means to be a ninja?)

Ujiteru studied Kotarou out of the corners of his eyes as if he were some exotic animal.

He had never known anyone else quite like Kotarou, even in his previous life.

"There appears to be unrest starting up around the ruins of [Kawagoe Castle](#) ,"

Kotarou changed the subject abruptly, though whether or not he had noticed the scrutiny was anyone's guess. "Spread by those who died at the [Battle of Kawagoe](#) to strike back at the Houjou. Ujikuni-dono hath gone out to subjugate

them, but I believe Ujimasa-dono is moving in earnest to take this opportunity to seize northern [Musashi](#) .

Ujiteru sighed.

"Those who died at the [Battle of Kawagoe](#) ... The troops of [Ougigayatsu-Uesugi Tomosada](#) , [Yamanouchi-Uesugi Norimasa](#) , and the [Koga Kubou](#) , then?"

In this world of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>

in which the Houjou had found themselves, the backlash they faced from the territories they had once invaded was violent indeed. Here the vanquished had power, for their hatred and bitterness became their strength in battle.

But no more so than the Houjou, who, vanquished themselves and destroyed at Hideyoshi's hands, had an ocean of hatred to draw from. With that hatred as their power, they had all been resurrected from the soil—only to be drawn into battle with those they had once defeated.

(How strange...)

By its very nature, the <<Yami-Sengoku >> was filled with onshou who sought only to fight and destroy. Like beasts driven by their rage and hatred, they rampaged with no method to their madness.

Though they too were onryou , they had regained too much of their reason with the passing of time to remain blindly caught in emotion. 'Wraiths' though they were, they had gradually regained their 'humanity.' And now they led lives in the present world that were strange beyond words.

In keeping with this trend, many of the onryou now possessed flesh, either by simple possession or kanshou .

"Does having bodies make us human...?" Ujiteru murmured matter-of-factly. "What in the world are we?"

" ... "

"What in the world...are we doing here?"

"Ujiteru-dono."

Ujiteru grimaced in self-derision. —He was neither purely **onryou** nor a living human being. He could not wail with whatever emotion overtook him like a mindless **onryou** , yet neither was there a place for him in this society. What was the <<**Yami-Sengoku** >>, this world that had created existences so warped and incomplete?

What were they fighting for now, centuries later...?

"I believe you will also be dispatched to the suppression of Kawagoe, Ujiteru-dono," Kotarou said as he drove.

"Did my brother so suggest?"

"Ujimasa-dono hath said that you will command the conquest of the North **Kantou** . Our enemies have always troubled us there. Your fighting arm will be needed."

"... Fighting arm, indeed?" Ujiteru touched his right arm. "Kotarou, let me put to thee a question."

"What question?"

"Wert thou too an **onryou** ? Didst even one such as thou embrace hatred at the moment of thy death?"

"Hatred...? Who knows?" Kotarou answered with no change at all in his expression. "It was my duty."

"Duty?"

"As long as Lord Ujiyasu is in this world, I must follow him."

"Dost thou mean that Father hath not been purified?" Ujiteru demanded.
"Where is he? What more knowest thou?"

"I know nothing more," Kotarou stated clearly.

"So even thou knowest not..."

"..."

Ujiteru sighed in resignation and looked out the window. "Because it was thy duty...? So there are those who would remain in this world even for such a reason?"

The sarcasm in his comment seemed to glance off Kotarou's imperviousness, and he received no reaction.

People of all types did indeed exist in the world, Ujiteru thought, closing his eyes.

Ujiteru's estate was located in [Hakone](#) , a dignified Japanese-style residence built in a hilly area on the banks of [Lake Ashi](#) directly opposite [Hakone Shrine](#) . The Houjou had chosen that spot in order to keep [Hakone Shrine](#) under their control. The spacious grounds and garden were well-maintained, and the mansion itself, constructed of Japanese cypress wood, had the air of a high-class historic Japanese inn.

Within, a grove of Japanese cypresses led to the lake, where he owned a

private wharf with several cruisers and motor boats moored nearby.

Night had fallen by the time Ujiteru and Kotarou returned. No sooner had they stopped the car at the entrance and descended than his trusted retainer [Kondou Tsunahide](#) came flying outside, face pale.

"Tono! You have returned! Where were you...?!"

"My apologies for worrying thee."

"A most serious matter hath transpired, Tono!" Kondou cried breathlessly. "Ujimasa-sama was attacked by an assassin from the Satomi!"

"What?!" Ujiteru's eyes widened abruptly. "Assassin! And [Aniue](#) ...? How doth he?!"

"You must head for [Odawara](#) at once! Tsunashige-sama hath already gone on ahead!"

"Good Heavens...!" Ujiteru looked up at Kotarou. Having guessed at the state of affairs, Kotarou was already back in the car with the engine started.

"Let us thither forthwith, Kotarou!"

It took them less than thirty minutes to arrive at [Odawara](#) from [Lake Ashi](#) going full speed. His eldest brother [Houjou Ujimasa](#) 's residence was located in the hilly section around Mt. Shiro across from [Odawara Castle](#)

and the [Tokaido Line](#) in the western part of the city.

As soon as he arrived, Ujiteru rushed across the paper lantern-lit courtyard with only brief greetings to the vassals who had come to greet him and headed straight into the house.

"[Aniue](#) !"

He threw open the paper door to Ujimasa's room with a bang. Everyone inside shot up in surprise and stared at him. His brother was sitting in night-robcs on a white futon in the center of the room.

"Ujiteru."

"How dost thou, [Aniue](#) ?!" Ujiteru cried, rushing over and kneeling on the [tatami](#) at his brother's side without regard for appearances. "I heard dire tidings of an attack on thee by an assassin! Wert thou hurt?"

"Nothing of consequence. As thou seest." Ujimasa smiled with a hand against his right shoulder, which lay exposed and wrapped in bandages.

There was a doctor sitting beside him with rolls of bandages and gauze at his feet. The medical treatment seemed to be over.

"He blundered. If I should ever allow myself to be taken down from behind..."

"Taken down... Soft, what of the assassin? Didst thou catch him?"

"He was rather better skilled at running away. My guards gave chase, but he escaped cleanly."

"They allowed him...to escape...?!"

Ujimasa had gone to Tokyo today. In order to survive in this expanded <<Yami-Sengoku >>,

they had to be versed in the ways of power of these modern people no less than the ways of the era in which they had been born. Ujimasa was utilizing the social position of his spirit vessel to consolidate his foothold.

"Those churls...! Those bastarding Satomi! I will avenge thee! I will find them and take their heads even if I must search under every stone!"

"Calm thee, Ujiteru. What is this? 'Twas no grave injury. Only the body of my vessel was hurt; I took no harm."

Ujiteru's hands dropped to the tatami as he deflated. Ujimasa directed his attendants to show the doctor out.

Everyone left the room, leaving only Ujimasa and Ujiteru.

"But for the Satomi to send an assassin... It doth appear the attack on Tateyama by Ujinori hath proven successful. Satomi Yoshitaka , resurrected at long last, hath now been whipped from his main stronghold—his loss of face must be great."

"I do not believe he will leave it so, vindictive snake that he is.

Belike he will send the assassin again. I pray thee use every caution whensoever thou wouldst set out from Odawara ."

"So I shall." Ujimasa looked at the bandages, sighing deeply. "So much yet remains to be done, or else those onshou malevolent to the Houjou will grow ever more impudent. We stand here,

resurrected; now we must survive, by my troth we will. We cannot be remiss."

"I pray thee, do not take too much upon thyself, [Aniue](#) —"

"'Tis no great matter to take another vessel if such be needed."

"[Aniue](#) ..."

Ujiteru frowned fiercely in exasperation. "Thou art as overmuch serious as thou wert four hundred years ago. Verily, there is no day when thou art not working thyself to exhaustion. Take a little care for thine own health, I pray thee. 'Tis not a matter resolved by the switching of vessels. I mean that thou must allow thyself time for rest."

"Resting only gives our foes the advantage."

"We will ensure the contrary. What, 'tis simplicity itself to give thee time to take thy repose. Thou wilt not disparage this Ujiteru, I hope.

We are the warriors of [Odawara](#) . Rely on us and trust that we shall guard thy rest," Ujiteru entreated.

Ujiteru pondered for a moment. Then he sighed and inclined his head. "I trust and rely upon thee always."

"Therefore recover thy health."

"As thou wilt, as thou wilt." Ujimasa gave in at last. ...Even the fourth head of the Houjou Clan had his moments of weakness when faced with such a fervent younger brother.

"I am sorry that thou wert called here at so late an hour. Stay here this night. There is more of which I would speak with thee."

"At thy command! In such case, thine offer will I gladly accept."

Ujiteru placed his fists with scrupulous precision on the tatami and bowed his head. "I will protect thee! Set thy mind at ease and sleep in peace with Ujiteru as thy guard!"

"Faith..." Ujimasa smiled wryly. "I do not understand thee, Ujiteru."

The two brothers smiled at each other.

"Ujiteru-ani!"

The shrill cry stopped him as soon as he left the room. Ujiteru turned to see a young man similar to him in age, though dressed in casual rough jeans rather than his formal navy-blue suit, walking toward him.

"[Ujikuni](#) ," Ujiteru greeted the young man. "Art thou come too?"

"I returned in all haste upon hearing of the attack upon Ujimasa-ani. I was much relieved to learn the injury was slight. 'Tis one small mercy, forsooth.

Ujikuni was the third of the Houjou brothers, a commander of dauntless courage who in his previous life had been master of [Hachigata Castle](#) and like Ujiteru, central to the governing of the North [Kantou](#) .

"Indeed. And why is thine arm in such sad state?"

His right arm hung from a white sling. Ujikuni grimaced and replied, "I botched up, [Aniue](#) ."

"Botched up? What hath happened?"

"'Twas the Uesugi, Ujiteru-ani!" Ujikuni exclaimed in vexation, looking up at him with hard eyes. "I fought a [Yasha-shuu](#) of the Uesugi! He appeared at Kawagoe...!"

"What...! Uesugi's [Yasha-shuu](#) ?!"

"[Ougigayatsu-Uesugi Tomosada](#) was destroyed by the [Yasha-shuu](#) , Ujiteru," a man in a dark-blue suit behind Ujikuni took up the thread of the conversation.

This man was [Houjou Tsunashige](#) , uncle to Ujiteru and his brothers. He had come to the mansion ahead of Ujiteru and the others upon hearing of Ujimasa's wound.

"Uncle."

"Last night, innocents from the city were slain in the clamorous rousing of the [onshou](#) who died at the [Kawagoe Engagement](#) . I warrant he hurried thither immediately upon hearing of those tidings and encountered Ujikuni on the way to [Kawagoe](#) . He engaged with our troops."

It had resulted in an unexpectedly violent [nenpa](#) -battle between wielders of power on all sides. The <<[nue](#)>> of the Houjou had been destroyed in a flash, and even Ujikuni had

barely escaped. That was where he had received his injury.

"Pray be careful, Ujiteru-ani. The power of <<[choubukuryoku](#)>>

wielded by the Uesugi is powerful beyond all rumor! Scores of our troops were sent to the other world in the blink of an eye, as if 'twere naught! 'Tis no common power—verily, this <<choubukuryoku >> of the Uesugi is surely a threat greater than any other to the onshou !"

"Ujikuni. What name did he give thee, he who fought thee?"

"I believe, Naoe Nobutsuna . I am certain 'twas the son of Kenshin's trusted retainer, Naoe Sanetsuna ."

"Sanetsuna-dono's...!"

Ujiteru knew Sanetsuna, whom he had met several times as a diplomat for the Uesugi. Several diplomatic documents he had borne to various clans including the Houjou and Oda, still remained.

But Sanetsuna's son...

"Did he not fight on the side of Kagekatsu in the Otate no Ran ...?"

"Ujiteru," Tsunashige said, looking at the tight, grim expression on Ujiteru's face. "Art thou thinking of Saburou...?"

"..."

"Aniue ,"

Ujikuni asked, "I have heard it said that Saburou hath become the Uesugi supreme commander and hath been four hundred years destroyer of

the onryou by Kenshin's command—is't so? If 'tis indeed true..."

"My men labour day and night to seek Saburou," Ujiteru told them,

distress creasing his brows. "Saburou as supreme commander of the Uesugi seems truth indeed. But I have heard that he hath been lost these thirty years since a battle with Oda and hath even now yet to be found. —Or mayhap he is no longer in this world..."

"But if Saburou still lives and commands the [Yasha-shuu](#) ...! What should we do? What says Ujimasa-ani? What intend you then?"

"Bring him back." There was no hesitation in Ujiteru's answer. "Is't not clear as day? Saburou is one of the Houjou. He must not be left with the Uesugi now that we are resurrected."

"Soft, Ujiteru. Saburou hath lived as one of the Uesugi for four hundred years while we slept beneath the ground. He is far different from us now, we who awoke a mere handful of years ago."

"The Uesugi betrayed Saburou!" Ujiteru returned forcefully. "Saburou was driven from his land by Kagekatsu, his life stolen from him! And more, Kenshin forced this toil upon him! Bound he hath been to the extermination of the [onryou](#) and to the Uesugi for these four hundred years! Kenshin is naught but a brute!"

"Ujiteru-ani..."

"'Twas ever Saburou's desire to return to the Houjou!" he shouted over Ujikuni. "Died he not in the attempt to cross [Mikuni Pass](#) ? Is't not proof? Yet we...Saburou...!"

His voice choked off. Ujikuni and Tsunashige looked silently at Ujiteru's trembling fists.

"We will bring him back," Ujiteru gritted out, lifting his head and glaring fiercely into midair. "Saburou is our brother. Recover him from Kenshin's hands we shall, by my troth! Then we will fight side by side; then we will conquer this country and bring to pass our dream, yet alive, yet cherished, of a Japan ruled by the benevolent hand of our father!"

Ujikuni nodded and Ujiteru nodded firmly back, hands still clenched and eyes glittering.

"None shall find Saburou before us, before we go to meet him. This time... This time...!" Ujiteru vowed.

Saburou...

His brother's face hung ever before his mind's eye.

"Come back to us, Saburou. Then we shall watch the twilight upon the [Sagami Sea](#) again together."

His youngest brother's smile at their parting...

Lingering still, as if it were the very symbol of his regret.

footnotes

[1] "Yellow Soil" (黄地) is pronounced "ouji", a homonym for "prince."

Ultramarine Chapter 3: The Dawn Is Not Yet Nigh

"Aniue , thou smell'st of the tide."

When had his brother said that to him?

He could hear the words now over the sound of the waves.

"The tide?"

"Ay..." his youngest brother had answered, child's lips laughing.

It had probably been because Ujiteru 's

residence had been so close to the coast. When he told his brother that in his garden he could hear the sound of waves and smell the tide, his brother had been delighted. At night the lullaby of the waves sang him to sleep. With their futons side by side, he had told his brother tales of heroes and great battles late into the night, Saburou badgering him for another and another until, lost in the music of Ujiteru's flute, his eyes had grown heavy and he had fallen asleep to the gentle sound of the waves outside. Saburou had loved those times.

Their mother Zuikeiin 's

blood had flowed strongly in his brother, and his features had resembled hers. But there had been no weakness in his eyes, extraordinary eyes reflecting all the brilliance of his force of life like a kaleidoscope, never to be forgotten once seen. Ujiteru had loved to sit beside his brother and look into those shifting colors.

That night—

The night before he left for [Echigo](#) ...

He spent that night at his brother Ujiteru's residence instead of at the Houjou main stronghold. And though his attendants reminded him of their early start on the morrow, he did not sleep. Instead, Ujiteru knew, he remained outside in the garden all night, listening tirelessly to the waves of [Miyuki Beach](#) .

As if he could not bear to miss a single one...

Ujiteru watched over his brother all through the night as he sat there with his arms around his knees.

Until night gave way to dawn—...

The [City of Odawara](#) had developed with the train station as its center. But though it was

quite transformed now from its days as a castle town, the sound of the waves at [Miyuki Beach](#) had not changed.

Ujiteru had come to the sea this morning at [Ujimasa](#) 's invitation.

Ujimasa, who was still unaccustomed to western-style clothing and avoided them unless absolutely necessary, was wearing a kimono of deep blue knotted silk which he seemed to find to his liking.

His right arm was suspended from the empty sleeve of his coat. Though the wound had not been deep, the doctor had cautioned him not to overdo things.

The refreshing early-morning sea breeze blew softly against them. Sunlight formed a glittering path to the coast, and they could clearly see the green Izu Peninsula to the west.

"I feel as if it hath been long since we saw the sea thus," Ujimasa remarked, listening to the gentle lapping of the waves. "I have scarce had time of late to set my gaze upon it. ...Sooth, it calms the heart, this sea where we were born and reared. Dost thou remember? When we two were children, I brought thee here to this beach. Ujiyasu 's sons though we were, we tucked in our clothes and fair gamboled with the children from the villages. Thou didst almost drown contending to dive longest—even then didst thou hate to lose."

"Thou likewise," Ujiteru returned, raising a hand against the dazzling reflection from the waves. "Did we not anger our guards when we rowed out to sea to practice sea maneuvers in an old leaking boat we found and patched with planks?"

"We were in the same boat then, in sooth," Ujimasa answered, eyes half-closed in remembrance.

"Even now I cannot forget that day...when the Taikou 's ships filled this

sea..."

"Aniue ..."

Ujimasa's gaze fell. Ujiteru knew the scene to which his thoughts had turned. —That day, watching from the main citadel of [Odawara Castle](#) as the ships of [Kuki](#) , [Chousokabe](#) , and the [Taikou](#) 's other generals swarmed into [Sagami Bay](#) , Ujimasa had shuddered.

Not in terror, but rage.

"They dared profane our sea..."

"..."

"Those cursed dead who cared for naught but gold and power," his brother muttered, and Ujiteru looked out again at the sea.

The finishing touch to Hideyoshi's unification of the country—that was what the subjugation of [Odawara](#) had meant. One by one, the daimyo had sent their troops in obedience to

Hideyoshi's command until an army of more than two hundred thousand had

surrounded [Odawara](#) . [Date Masamune](#) , their ally, rather than defying the [Taikou](#) , had joined in the siege. Though standing alone and unaided and bereft of allies, the Houjou had refused to yield.

Their brother [Ujinori](#) and Ujimasa's son [Ujinao](#) had insisted that they capitulate. But Ujimasa and Ujiteru had refused,

choosing instead to stand fast and defy Hideyoshi to the bitter end. It was only the fall of [Hachiouji Castle](#) , their main strategic point in [Musashi](#) , that had forced their surrender.

(Let those who came later say what they will...)

Neither Ujimasa nor Ujiteru had been fools blind to the direction in which the world had been heading—in truth, quite the opposite. Ujimasa had seen that future, the direction of time's flow; it had been part of the reason for his refusal to yield. For how could one who had known Ujiyasu's skillful governing surrender to the rule of an upstart like Hideyoshi?

Even Ujinao had not understood; no one could have, who had not truly known Ujiyasu.

"We were not wrong, Ujiteru. I believe it even now," said Ujimasa, standing in the ocean breeze. "As I believed it then, even as the sword pierced my belly. Nay, I believed that *the path* for which the Houjou aimed was the right one. ...If that were not so, then we would not be able to answer to those who died for the Houjou."

And Ujimasa repeated the words as if he wanted Ujiteru to hear them spoken out loud: "*We were right.*"

Ujiteru thought of the soldiers of [Hachiouji Castle](#) .

Ujimasa understood his pain. The gentleness of his words was almost an unspoken forgiveness of the wavering doubt in Ujiteru's heart.

Ujiteru had always rejoiced in his brother's consideration for others.

He loved his brother's directness and honesty. The pressures on the heir of a lord of such rare wisdom and benevolence as [Houjou Ujiyasu](#) were surely beyond his ken. And now, in this drastically transformed era, the fate of the Houjou rested on those shoulders. It was

impossible for him to measure the depth of his brother's suffering. But Ujimasa's eyes were still as direct as ever. Setting his father as his ideal, he strove with all his might to make that ideal his reality.

Ujiteru had always esteemed his brother for that sincerity, loved him, wanted to do all that he could to help him.

(That is why I will never regret it.)

The fact that he would be on his brother's side, ever and always.

He held it as his pride.

He would never regret it. Yet...

"..."

The sound of waves echoed in his breast.

Ujiteru half-closed his eyes as he listened to the voice of this sea of his birthplace.

"Aniue , thou smell'st of the tide."

He heard his brother's voice over the sound of the waves once more, bringing back memories of that distant, distant day.

Guessing at the silent Ujiteru's thoughts, Ujimasa asked gently, "'Kuni hath already told thee of his encounter with the Yasha-shuu , I trust?"

"...!"

"Art thou thinking of Saburou?"

His eldest brother seemed to know that he had not slept last night.

Even after going to bed he had simply lain awake, too restless to fall asleep. So he had finally given up and gone out into the garden to gaze at the moon, thinking all the while about the brother who had died four hundred years ago in a strange land.

"...No tidings have we yet had of him. Doth he know of our resurrection? O where we are, what we do?"

"Such sorrow and regret Saburou hath surely felt..." Ujiteru finally said the words that had been turning over and over again in his mind since last night. "His [onryou](#) did briefly appear at [Samegao Castle](#) after the [Otate no Ran](#) , I have heard. Kenshin bound Saburou with a mission, refusing to release him even in death. ...Humiliation upon humiliation: it cannot be otherwise. The one 'Kuni encountered yesterday—"

"[Naoe Nobutsuna](#) ? [Sanetsuna](#) 's son, he did say."

"That man lead the attack against Saburou in the [Otate no Ran](#) . He was a chief vassal of [Kagekatsu](#) , the foe who caused Saburou's death! How not humiliation, forced as he

was to work hand-in-hand with his enemy? Upon whose hands doth his blood lie? I do not understand Kenshin's designs. The reason for the [Otate no Ran](#) lies all with Kenshin! I will never forgive him!"

"...Ujiteru..."

"Four hundred years, [Aniue](#) !"

Once roused, Ujiteru could not be so easily calmed.

"Even to think upon it staggers the imagination! The time Saburou hath been slave to Kenshin is enough to bury a castle in the earth! He hath been denied the chance to return to that other realm for all those long years!"

After venting all that he had been brooding over for so long, Ujiteru fell into silence, the flush on his face receding. Ujimasa stood idly by, listening to his fiery-tempered brother rant his fury.

Inevitably, pain clouded his expression after he had finished tearing into Kenshin.

(If we had arrived in time...)

They could probably have saved him if their reinforcements had only gotten there in time.

If they had only crossed that precipitous pass more quickly...

If he'd only had more power at his command...

(With these two hands I would have been able to bring Saburou back.)

Ujiteru had entered [Echigo](#) about half a year after the start of the [Otate no Ran](#) to rescue Saburou-Kagetora. He had taken [Kabasawa Castle](#) near the [Echigo](#) border and engaged Kagekatsu's forces with the castle as his front-line

base. But Kagekatsu's side had controlled the entire road from there to the [Otate](#) , and to break through had been beyond his strength. In the end, a harsh winter had descended on [Echigo](#) , forcing Ujiteru back to the [Kantou](#) . *I will return to rescue you.* Leaving behind only that fervent

promise, he had reluctantly departed from snow-bound [Echigo](#) .

He had never set foot on that land again.

When he heard the bitter tidings of the outcome of the war, Ujiteru had been tormented by the inconsolable regret of knowing how close he had come to [Mikuni Pass](#) in his second rescue attempt.

"When we left [Echigo](#) —I

should have gone to snatch Saburou away then, I alone if need be! What care I for that blasted land? I should have gone straight to the [Oate](#) and taken Saburou away by whatever means necessary...!"

"Thou wast not to blame, Ujiteru," Ujimasa rebuked him quietly. "All that thou couldst, thou didst. Thou must not blame thyself."

—"But if I had brought him home then...! Then all that came to pass thereafter, all that Saburou endured... He would not have died, nor bound by the Uesugi for four hundred years...!"

"Ujiteru."

There was such deep patience in Ujimasa's voice that Ujiteru stopped. Ujimasa gazed at him calmly.

"Hast thou thought upon...Saburou's reasons?"

"Saburou's reasons..."

"I cannot think it possible for any human being to live for four hundred years by coercion alone. Dost thou not think it likely Saburou

hath his reasons for living through these four hundred years?"

A gust of sea wind ruffled their hair.

Ujiteru's eyes widened.

"Reasons..."

"Hath not Saburou *lived through* these four hundred years?" Ujimasa admonished. "All that we thought, all that we felt during our short fifty years, yea verily I do think Saburou hath lived and tasted it all.

"...Aniue ..."

—"We experience much as we live our lives. Dost thou not think it wrong to pity another when we know naught but what we see of his circumstances?"

Ujiteru was silent, rendered speechless.

It was probably true, he thought. It was easy to pity him, but the things they did not know about Saburou far outnumbered what they did know.

People's hearts were not straight, easily-traced pieces of string. That much was obvious from the onshou of the <<Yami-Sengoku >>.

Among those who had died unnatural deaths, there were many who were purified cleanly while others who had lived full, satisfied lives turned into onshou ; it was impossible to predict one or the other.

It was impossible to know another's heart purely from their circumstances..

(And yet...)

Ujiteru looked at his brother.

Ujimasa was staring at the coast.

Ah... Ujiteru thought. It's happening again.

There were times when Ujiteru could not read his brother's thoughts—times like this, when Ujimasa gazed into the distance, lips pressed into a thin line, no trace of either laughter or sorrow on his impassive face.

He never expressed his emotions openly at the best of times, but when he had this look on his face, even Ujiteru could not guess at what lay in his heart.

After a silence encompassing unnumbered waves breaking against the shore, Ujiteru asked gently, "Thou didst never much show Saburou thy smile, I think?"

"..."

"Nor thy emotions..."

His brother remained silent.

This, too, was a part of Ujimasa. Though he could speak frankly to Ujiteru about anything, he did not ordinarily open his heart to his

other brothers. Rather than seeking brotherly indulgence, Ujikuni , Ujinori and the others held their eldest brother in awe.

It was easy to misunderstand, and certainly some of their vassals had remarked (*It is as if to Ujimasa-sama, his brothers are naught but his chess pieces.*)

But that was not true. Though Ujimasa held himself apart from his brothers, it was certainly not because he did not feel any affection for them, but because he wished to avoid any hint of conspiracy. This his brothers knew and understood well from the deep prudence he had shown at his father's retirement and his kindness towards his wife Oubaiin . Otherwise they would certainly not look up to him with such genuine reverence.

(...Even so...)

His occasional coldness made even Ujiteru sometimes believe that their brother thought of them as nothing more than chess pieces.

When news of Saburou's death by ritual suicide had reached Odawara , there had been no trace of shock in Ujimasa's bearing.

Sitting at the head of the main hall, Ujimasa had only nodded, murmuring, "I see..."

Those two short words, nothing more.

He had displayed no grief, no anger: only thanked the messenger and immediately turned his attention to governmental affairs.

Ujiteru later heard that even the retainers had been bewildered by his lack of reaction.

"Aniue is so cold!"

A not-unfamiliar rebuke.

He had heard it when Ujimasa had broken off their alliance with Echigo .

Despite knowing his brother Saburou Kagetora was a hostage there, he had, trusting in his own judgment, one-sidedly revoked the alliance.

Kenshin had been angry—not surprising for a man known for his sense of justice and honor.

"Why did you break off the alliance without even a word to your brother Kagetora?" he had written in outrage.

Still, there had certainly been circumstances which had forced their hand. The ferocious battles with Takeda Shingen after the forging of the Echigo - Sagami alliance and his attack against Takiyama Castle , the Houjou's humiliating defeat at Mimase Pass ... The alliance between Echigo and Sagami had yielded little if any practical result; Ujiteru, too, knew that many within the clan had felt that breaking it and making peace with Takeda was the more prudent course.

But Ujiteru had been unable to approve of such a plan. However painful the defeat had been, he had felt the same way as Kenshin. For all that Kagetora was Kenshin's adopted son, he was also a hostage. His fate rested entirely in Kenshin's hands in the moment they broke off the alliance.

The Houjou returned Kakizaki Haruie , their hostage from Echigo . But Kenshin did not return Kagetora.

Ujiteru had been beside himself. The Houjou's next moves would probably be a death sentence for Saburou Kagetora!

"Wouldst thou abandon Saburou...?!"

No longer able to contain himself, he had gone to see Ujimasa at [Odawara Castle](#) .

"We cannot devote our full strength to the battle, should we sever our alliance with the Uesugi in such a manner! Are we so desperate of an ally in the Takeda that we must abandon Saburou?!"

"Better, then, for thee to forget Saburou," Ujimasa returned without any change at all in his expression. *"No choice have we but to think of Saburou as one dead to us."*

"That is too cruel!"

In response to Ujiteru's impassioned response, Ujiteru said only: *"This alliance with Takeda was the last request of our father."*

And Ujiteru had swallowed back his words.

That succinct reply had been enough.

And that had been all. His brother's feelings had been entirely closed to him.

(Such coldness—...)

This same expression had been on his face then.

It chafed at him that he could not see into his brother's heart.

(Is Saburou not important to him?)

He didn't think that was the case, but he could not help but doubt.

He stared penetrating at his brother's profile.

As if he could feel Ujiteru's gaze on him, Ujimasa turned away from the coastline after a moment.

"Ujiteru," Ujimasa said, "Let me amend my command to thee. Thou must seek out Saburou as swiftly as thou canst."

(What...?)

For a moment he doubted his ears. "Then..."

"Find Saburou and bring him back to the Houjou. We must not allow him to remain with the Uesugi longer."

"Just so!" Ujiteru nodded firmly. "Saburou is our brother! This time I will bring him back home to the [Sagami Sea](#) ! Let us fight together for the Houjou conquest of the country...! Let us soar across this great land!"

"For the Houjou conquest," Ujimasa smiled quietly. "Ay, together."

"[Aniue](#) ..."

Laughter bubbled up within Ujiteru as everything he had been brooding over for so long suddenly evaporated away. But in that moment—

"!"

Ujiteru instantly raised his guard, leopard-like, upon sensing the odd presence at his back.

Something was there.

"What is the matter, Ujiteru?"

Stepping protectively in front of Ujimasa, Ujiteru examined their surroundings sharply. He gathered his <<energy>> and focused his senses on the flow of air around them.

There—a dark, stagnant, obviously human aura in polar opposition to the wide munificence of the ocean, permeating into his very skin: a scent of—

(Bloodlust.)

"Someone watches us," Ujiteru replied in a low voice, "most carefully."

Whoosh!

The sand at their feet suddenly collapsed inward. Though they both managed to leap aside before it could take them off their feet—

"Wh...!"

A hand suddenly thrust out of the sand to take hold of Ujimasa's ankle.

"Aniue !"

"Guh...!"

It dragged Ujimasa's foot toward the sinkhole. He struggled in vain to loosen its grasp.

"Thou—!"

Ujiteru's mind-blast exploded at Ujimasa's feet. The hand disappeared back into the ground. Ujimasa leapt back out of reach, but black hands reappeared a second later and grabbed both of Ujiteru's ankles—

"Ugh...!"

They tightened around his feet with enough force to tear him limb from limb. Ujiteru struck back with another mind-blast. The hands sank back as towers of sand erupted from the ground around them like geysers.

"Aniue !"

Protecting Ujimasa's back, Ujiteru traced a circle around them with an index finger, surrounding them with a barrier on the sand.

"Who art thou? Show thyself! Who servest thou under, thou coward—?!"

"Ujiteru...!"

A storm of sand struck them with an earth-shaking roar. The barrier groaned horrifically, but held.

"Graaaah!"

Ujiteru wove another layer of support into the <<goshinha >> against the terrible force and pressure building up around them, but the attack continued relentlessly. The sand had become a weapon, and its might was only increasing. The moment the <<goshinha >> shattered, the sand-storm would bore into their flesh and tear them apart.

"Thou chicken-livered churl!"

Ujiteru reached for power with all his might, concentrating it beneath his navel—then released it in a single violent burst. There was the impact of something heavy striking the beach a moment before a waterfall of sand poured down from the sky. Then—

"Guh!"

A black hand suddenly shot up from the ground and grabbed Ujimasa's throat from behind.

"Aniu...!"

Ujiteru gasped, eyes wide. The assassin's arm was missing above the elbow; it was unattached to any body. This was no ordinary power. He had to do something before it snapped Ujimasa's neck! Ujimasa choked out in anguish, "Uji...te...ru..."

"Thou impertinent—!"

Ujiteru took out a small crystal sphere with the character for "tiger" written within. He exhaled lightly and threw it at Ujimasa.

"Awaken, O sacred beast!"

A golden tiger, spirit-guardian beast of the Houjou, exploded from the crystal and leapt to the attack.

A piercing scream rang out from behind Ujimasa.

Ujimasa fell to his knees as the hand released him. Ujiteru dashed up to his

brother.

(He's getting away...!)

Ujiteru felt the aura of their unseen attacker quite distinctly.

"Kotarou!" he yelled, his voice high with tension. "Go! After the assassin! Let not him escape!"

Though there was no reply, Ujiteru knew that Kotarou had heard him and obeyed.

The bloodlust dissipated and faded, leaving only the sound of the waves.

Returning unperturbedly to shore, as if nothing had happened.

"How dost thou, [Aniue](#) ? Art thou wounded?"

"Nay...I am unharmed," Ujimasa gasped, touching the area around his throat.

"Those villains! They dare dispatch their assassins even here..."

[Odawara](#) was the stronghold of the Houjou. They had laid a barrier across the

city, and those from outside (spirits, at least) should not have been able to enter so easily.

"[Aniue](#) , so even at this moment..."

"Most likely." Ujimasa glared sharply. "We must be wary. Let all know, Ujiteru. Cursed assassin, thou shalt not escape [Odawara](#) ."

He ground his teeth.

(We'll not let our foe do as he pleases.)

Burning with rage, Ujiteru glared balefully in the direction the assassin had fled.

"Aniue !"

A crowd of fire-trucks and ambulances awaited them back at the estate.

Black smoke poured endlessly out of the garden, and several of their vassals were being carried out for medical aid. Ujikuni pushed his way through the crowd of onlookers and dashed over as soon as he spotted them.

"What has happen'd?!"

—"I entreat your pardon, Ujimasa-ani, Ujiteru-ani! An assault was made against us...!" Ujikuni shouted frantically, his face soot-stained.

"An assault!"

"It came too suddenly and without warning. The ground shook violently, as if with countless explosions underground..." Ujikuni explained breathlessly, "...and only within the bounds of the estate...it was as if the world were being overturned...the outer buildings were destroyed completely, and most of the buildings suffered damage..."

"An earthquake...?"

"'Twas no earthquake, **Aniue** !" Ujikuni exclaimed, lifting his head. "It was an assassin! Men clad in black appeared while everyone lay stunned...!"

Ujimasa and Ujiteru looked at each other.

"And then?"

"We returned fire and left the foe dispersed and scatter'd, but could not take them..."

"They escaped?"

Ujikuni nodded, chagrined. They could guess by his appearance that a <<**nenpa**>> battle of considerable violence had been fought here.

Which meant that though the grounds were covered with layer upon layer of shield-barriers, the assassins had somehow been able to break through and penetrate within?

"**Aniue** ..."

Ujimasa pushed his way through the crowd and stepped within. The scene that greeted his eyes was dismal indeed. The ground was treacherous with sinkholes, and almost all the structures were fully or half-destroyed.

"You wretches...!"

Fury flushed Ujiteru's face a dark crimson, and his teeth were clenched so hard that his jaws ached.

Next to him, Ujimasa ordered, "Inform all, Ujiteru. **Odawara** is on battle

alert."

"Aniue ."

"We will transfer to the estate at Hakone for the nonce. Assassins of the Satomi, this is not the end. Do not think to leave Odawara with your lives."

Though the words were quietly spoken, a glance at his profile informed Ujiteru of his brother's violent rage; his brows were drawn as fiercely as those of Fudou Myouou, The Immovable , and the blood vessels stood out clearly from his pale temples. Ujikuni drew a startled breath beside them.

"Satomi... Then the assassin yesterday...!"

"Satomi Yoshitaka ,

thou vile worm..." Ujimasa growled in a low voice. "Goest thou so far to oppose and anger us? Thou wilt be made to regret thy gall and the blade thou turn'st against the Houjou, doubt it not."

Ultramarine Chapter 4: The Dragon's Sons

Nigh half a score of their retainers had fallen victim to the attack.

Ujimasa transferred his residence to his brother's estate on the banks of Lake Ashi and gathered and placed their troops at Odawara Castle on battle alert.

Though they had wanted to avoid combat within the city as much as possible, it would be easier said than done if the types of attacks employed by their enemy were any indication. That worst-case scenario was why Ujikuni and their troops were on the lookout at Odawara Castle

The guerrilla-style attacks had struck several locations at roughly the same time.

The first had been Ujimasa's estate. The second, Matsubara Shrine . There had been three locations within the city: Sannouguchi , Hayakawaguchi , and Hakoneguchi , sites that had once played the role of strategic defensive points for

the castle, and now served as foci for the shield-barriers erected around the castle lands.

Ujimasa orders had been succinct and swift: reinforce the weakening shield-barriers immediately; search for Satomi's men.

It was evening by the time Kotarou, whom Ujiteru had dispatched against the assassin who had attacked them at Miyuki Beach , returned to Odawara Castle .

"Attack by mind-projection?"

Both Ujiteru and Ujikuni frowned at Kotarou's report.

"What mean'st thou, Kotarou?"

"The assassin who attacked Ujimasa-dono and Ujiteru-dono this morning—that person was not there in body. I have sent the Fuuma in pursuit; I believe, by the residual 'energy' left from the guerilla-style strikes that occurred so near in time this morning, that all were by the hand of the same person."

"The same person?"

Ujikuni stared at Kotarou disbelievingly.

"Yet we did see these assassins with our own eyes in several places in the city—yea, and fought them too, not minutes apart! Surely our foe could not have made divisions of himself?"

"Mayhap better said: a division of mind," Kotarou responded with his usual cool, expressionless implacability. "The attacks, I rate, were performed with mind-projection from afar. If any of the assailants were here in fact, it was..."

"The black-clad men who struck the manor?"

Ujiteru scowled at the map of [Odawara City](#) spread out in front of him.

"What frightful power, if this conclusion be true..."

"It cannot be, [Aniue](#) . One man alone, striking at so many places? All at once?"

"Rather, several mind-projections sent hither at once to react according to their circumstances." Ujiteru glared into midair, elbows propped on the desk and hands pressed together in front of his mouth. "'Tis not unlike dividing myself, withal. Those several pieces of myself—nay of my mind—would I then scatter, each master of such destructive power as we saw. The control of even two minds is beyond most; to think that one of such ability could serve Satomi..."

"My followers devote all their attention to seeking the identity of the assassin," Kotarou reported dispassionately.

"What, then, shall we do when next they attack? That is the question. I see no meaning in fighting phantom projections."

"We must strike at the source."

"Damnation!" Ujikuni chewed his nails incessantly. "What a troublesome lout..."

"[Aniue](#) 's protection comes before all. Let us increase his guard. The barrier over [Hakone](#) is tighter still than that over [Odawara](#) , and will not be so easily breached. When it comes time, let us take the battle to [Hakone Shrine](#) . Kotarou—" Ujiteru turned to the head of the Fuuma ninjas. "Go thou to [Hakone](#) and join my brother's guard. We will command [Odawara](#) ."

"Ay, my lord!"

"The enemy must surely have infiltrated [Odawara](#) ."

Ujiteru turned his gaze to the bright lights of the city streets below the castle tower.

"The shield-barrier over [Odawara](#) , woven from the power of the holy ground at [Hakone](#) , is extremely strong. It is impossible that a mind-projection should

penetrate from afar, however powerful its source. We must rate, therefore, that he is within the city."

"[Kanshousha](#) ...!" Ujikuni's eyes widened abruptly. "Is't thy meaning that our foe is [kanshousha](#) ?"

"A spirit who hath taken possession of a body cannot enter the barrier; it would knock him away. But 'twould not be impossible for a [kanshousha](#) ,"

Ujiteru concluded grimly, his face assuming the mien of the strategist he had been four hundred years ago. "It doth appear as well that he is acquainted with the lay of the land. We must be wary and vigilant in all that we do."

"Ay, my lord!" the vassals gathered around them answered in one voice, nodding firmly.

The banks of [Lake Ashi](#) , enveloped by the stillness of deep night, suddenly transformed from the

bustling sight-seeing spot it was in the day time to a place of exquisite grace and beauty.

Houjou Tsunashige gazed at the streets lined with Japanese-style inns glittering on the

opposite shore from the large glass window of the second-floor drawing room. The wall clock chimed eleven, and he turned to Ujimasa seated on the sofa.

"Shouldst thou not take thy rest, Ujimasa? Surely thou art tired."

"I am well, Uncle," Ujimasa answered as an attendant rewrapped the bandage around his wounded right shoulder. The assassin's attack had shaken him little, if at all. But such iron nerves were, perhaps, required from one who would be head of a clan.

"And thou, Uncle? Shouldst thou not retire to thy bed as well? Thine aspects seem care-worn and strain'd."

"What. Only in protection of thy safety. 'Tis naught."

Finished with his task, the attendant stepped away, then exited the room at Ujimasa's word of thanks.

"Sooth, thou art calm, Ujimasa."

"The head of a clan in panic would only disturb his retainers and leave them in no better state. Besides, what reason have I to fear this assassin, with Ujiteru and Ujikuni and so many others protecting me?"

"Thou dost truly place great faith in thy younger brothers."

Tsunashige sounded rather envious.

"You are good brothers to each other: [Ujiyasu](#) -dono's sons most truly. How much blood hath been spilled by brother fighting brother for ascendancy in other clans? Much admiration do I hold for the strong unity between you." Leaning against the window, Tsunashige finished off an iced coffee. "[Genan-sama](#) , too, hath said full oft: Ujiyasu's sons are the treasures of the Houjou and its pride."

"... Indeed?"

"Each hath his part and doth perform it well; each upholdeth the clan. Whether Ujiteru or Ujikuni—they know 'teamwork,' as I believe the people of this era would call it. Is it not an ideal?"

"..."

Ujimasa silently slid his arm into the sleeve of his kimono. Tsunashige looked out at the quiet surface of [Lake Ashi](#) .

"I doubt not, Ujimasa, of the victory of thee and thy brothers in this <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>.

Sooth, you will surely change this era with your extraordinary existences. Government officials of this present age lack naught but swords and armor to make them commanders of the [Sengoku](#) .

Those who rule must bear the armor and the sword within their heart: armor to defend against temptation, sword to cut down the injustices of the world. They cannot protect the people but by putting their own lives at risk: such is the lesson we must teach the people of this era. Let us not bar ourselves from the world of politics and finance because we come from the past; verily, we should display our might. The

generals of the Sengoku will pave the way to the future for this world. Doth thy blood not thrill at the thought?"

"Of course. Such was always my intention," Ujimasa smiled. "Emerging victorious from the <<Yami-Sengoku >>

is but the first step to our goal, for all is hollow if we cannot also take the world of the living. The world of the dead is an empty shell; our existences here are without meaning if we do not leave aught behind in the modern era. No matter how long it requires, I will bring it about."

"I doubt not that thou wilt," Tsunashige nodded confidently. "This is the spring of the true era of the Houjou. Sooth, I believe this to be the reason for our return. For most surely doth this era need the tenacious determination of those who once lived in the Sengoku . How but by that stern, unfaltering will for victory can an abundance rooted in this vast land—rather than a prosperity fragile as bubbles—be secured for the people?"

—"..."

"This era called to us. Dost thou not think so, Ujimasa?"

"Wouldst thou then say also: we were destroyed four hundred years ago for this era, Uncle?"

"...?"

Ujimasa asked with an odd expression on his face, "Uncle, dost thou not blame me?"

"Blame?"

"The responsibility for the destruction of our clan lieth wholly in these hands. Wilt thou not censure me for it? Wilt thou not ask why I did not submit to the Taikou as did so many other daimyo?—the reason for my refusal to yield, despite the terrible sacrifices?"

A touch of candor suddenly entered Tsunashige's expression.

Self-mocking laughter filled Ujimasa's eyes.

"We were such fools..."

"Dost thou truly so believe?"

"Ay, fools belike," Ujimasa answered quietly, looking up. "Yet we did not deceive ourselves with our self-belief."

"Ujimasa."

"My choice was in error if one should think of the immediate peace of the people. Without question. If I am to be accused of self-absorption for putting our lives in the balance, then so be it. Yet we truly believed to the last that we had not erred in that great moral law which we followed. The Taikou's power, rooted in governance without compassion, could never bring peace to the people. We were not wrong in that belief; nay, nor yet that we must sell our lives dearly. Mayhap all my reason for remaining in this world lieth in my ardent desire to vindicate those beliefs."

History is written by the victors. To history, then, the losers are ever in the wrong.

But can we really say that the victors are always right, the losers always wrong?

There is no place in history for the words of the vanquished, for even the ones that should be heard have all been erased.

"History must be proven: so I believe," Ujimasa stated quietly. "What error leads will one day falter. Those errors will be corrected, to expose other errors to be corrected in their turn, one by one. Thus do we progress with each iteration. We have awakened in this era because we are finally needed: it must be so. Our own era was too young to accept our ideals; I believe this era is mature enough at last." Though soft, hidden passion echoed in the depths of his voice. "Let us...prove it so, Uncle."

"Ujimasa."

"The Heavens Above likewise wait upon't." Ujimasa softly stood from the sofa and walked up to the large glass window to look out at the panoramic night view of [Lake Ashi](#) .

The mountain-ringed lake quietly reflected the distant lights of the wharf. Countless ripples ran across its jet-black surface as if stirred by a tiny breeze. Ujimasa was reminded of the legend of [Lake Ashi](#) 's Dragon God each time he came here, and was inclined to believe that night would be when one might learn the truth of that tale.

Perhaps those gentle ripples were the stirrings of the Dragon God at the bottom of the lake, Ujimasa thought, and smiled a little.

"If the disturbances at [Odawara](#) grow more clamorous still, the Uesugi will interpose themselves, belike."

Ujimasa's chin jerked up.

Tsunashige was also gazing out at [Lake Ashi](#) , leaning against the cool glass.

"And so soon after their exchange with Ujikuni. Mayhap their attention will turn more in the direction of the Houjou. Their <<[choubukuryoku](#)>> is more powerful by far than rumour'd. Should the [Yasha-shuu](#) of the Uesugi not concern us more than the Satomi, Ujimasa?"

A light vertical line creased Ujimasa's forehead.

Tsunashige glanced at it out of the corners of his eyes.

"Thou hast heard no news of Saburou, it appears."

"...No..."

"Ujiteru hath told me... Thou hast commanded him to bring Saburou back to the Houjou. Ujiteru is overjoyed even under these dire circumstances. I cannot blame him for it."

Ujiteru was ecstatic that Ujimasa was thinking of Saburou and ashamed that he had suspected Ujimasa of alienating their youngest brother.

"No greater joy for Ujiteru exists than to fight alongside his brothers. So

thou, too, art concerned about Saburou."

"I am concerned about him," Ujimasa replied with that somber expression on his face again. "'Twould be troublesome indeed if one with such inhuman and unnatural <<powers>> were to become our enemy."

Tsunashige turned to him, eyes wide.

"Ujimasa, thou..."

"..."

The gaze fixed upon the dark lake was completely devoid of emotion.

"I have roughly sifted him; we must assume at his command a far greater destructive potential than rumors imply. No longer is he a mere warrior: sooth, he is the most dangerous person in this <<Yami-Sengoku>>, Uncle, and we must be wary."

"..."

"A bomb cannot be allowed to explode whensoever it will. If we cannot claim him for the Houjou, then...our only choice is to rid ourselves of him."

"Ujimasa!" Tsunashige exclaimed angrily. Ujimasa only looked at him quietly. —"Art thou not Saburou's elder brother? How then canst thou say thou wouldst be rid of him if he cannot be claimed...!"

"So I say because I am his elder brother."

There existed in his hard voice no space for brotherly indulgence.

"If he would rather remain Uesugi than return to the Houjou, then he is Saburou no longer: he is our enemy, and none more dangerous. One must either possess a nuclear weapon or destroy it; there is no other alternative."

"...Thou..."

"Saburou is an intelligent child. No blame do I render him for failing to take Echigo for the Houjou in his previous life, but I do not believe him foolish enough to have forgotten whether his true duty lies with Uesugi Kagetora or Houjou Saburou, Uncle."

Tsunashige was silent.

Not emotion, but logic, he thought.

The reason Ujimasa wanted Kagetora back was not what Ujiteru had presumed: not because he wanted to regain a precious younger brother, but because that brother would be useful to him. Because if he was not with them, he was a threat to them. Ujimasa's spoken reasons had been as conscience dictated, but he had no such affection for Kagetora in his heart of hearts.

—In any case, such were the thoughts reflected in Tsunashige's eyes.

Though it seemed that Ujiteru desperately wanted to deny his eldest brother's cold-heartedness.

(He is so cold—...)

But it was not incomprehensible to Tsunashige, for their era had demanded it of them. Many great men of the Sengoku had shown equal cruelty to their kin: those who had exiled their

fathers, those who had arranged the assassinations of their sons, those who had driven their brothers to ritual suicide... Soft-heartedness imperiled your own life. You could not survive without a measure of cruelty, for your kin could become your greatest enemies.

Miraculously, such suspicion and jealousy had been rare within the Houjou Clan. Take Ujiteru, for example—so effusive with affection and naked trust that one might almost call him a fool.

But this brother was a little different from the rest.

(Because the Houjou needs you to be this way, Ujimasa...?) Tsunashige asked Ujimasa's cynical profile. (Because...you're the eldest?)

Ujimasa looked down slightly, then finally up at him.

"Let us order the assassin be caught as soon as may be, that this situation spreads no further. We must not allow the Uesugi to interfere in Odawara .

We will send our navy against the Satomi and deal them such a hard lesson that they will never think to repeat such foolishness.

"Indeed."

"Let us show all the world the true might of the Houjou," Ujimasa declared quietly.

Tsunashige nodded.

The dark lake rippled once more as if it were watching over their conversation.

The lights never dimmed that night at the Houjou estate on the banks of [Lake Ashi](#) .

Two shadows looked up at those lights from the lake shore.

"I suppose they're so terrified now that they cannot even sleep at night," the tall shadow muttered in a voice incongruously high for his heavy-set body.

"Heheh. No surprise there. None of their barriers can keep me out. I'm just itching to put my skills to use. I will very much enjoy seeing how you'll crumble, you Houjou bastards."

"Truly..." said Heizou in response to the younger man next to him.

"Return and tell Yoshitaka-sama that I will present the head of our old enemy, the lord of the Houjou, to him within three days' time. Without fail."

"Three days."

"That's right. ...I will kill him within three days," he declared confidently. "Though it's likely Ujimasa-dono no longer even remembers

my name... Heheh. I will make him remember. The name of his one-time loyal retainer, whose castle he took." The man's eyes, still trained on the lights of the Houjou estate, narrowed sharply. "I cannot wait to see what expression will be on my old lord's face."

"Matsuda-sama..."

"That's when I'll tell him everything. He's thick as a plank when it comes to his brothers. Oh, the shame Saburou-dono suffered... But the lord brother's ignorance really is unfortunate for both—" He howled with laughter. "I will tell you every detail, [Houjou Ujimasa](#) ..."

the assassin muttered to the darkness. "All my hatred of you. You won't have an easy death, oh no. I'll keep you alive, show you the agony of hell on earth, destroy [Odawara](#) and [Hakone](#) so completely that no one will ever be able to walk there again.

Waves rippled across the lake's ebony surface.

The mountaintops concealed the moon, and heavy clouds blanketed the night sky above [Hakone](#) .

Ultramarine Chapter 5: The Battle for Hakone

The attacks, as the Houjou had anticipated, were far from over. The second incident occurred that day at dawn.

Ujiteru left [Odawara](#) to Ujikuni and immediately headed over by car upon hearing the news. The attack had been directed not at [Odawara](#) , but [Souun Temple](#) in [Hakone-Yumoto](#) , the entrance to [Hakone](#) .

Several fire trucks and ambulances had arrived before him, and police officers and rescue personnel filled the area with frenetic activity.

Within, a massive fissure had split the ground apart. While the main temple had escaped complete destruction, its western wall had been leveled, exposing the inside of the building.

Of their vassals who had been stationed at the temple as guards, several were being taken to the hospital, and several more had had to flee their spirit vessels. The rock garden which had been the pride of the temple had been gouged apart and could no longer sustain its original shape. But the worst damage was centered on the tombs of five generations of the Houjou family.

"That accursed wretch...destroyed the tombs...!" Ujiteru struck the crumbled wall in rage.

[Souun Temple](#) was the family temple of the Later Houjou Clan. It had been built by [Ujitsuna](#) , the clan's second head, for his father [Souun](#) 's funeral rites, and had been a magnificent edifice before [Hideyoshi](#) razed it to the ground. The town of [Yumoto](#) had been built around [Souun Temple](#) , though

now the temple was nothing more than a tiny complex tucked away in a corner of the spa town...

The rock garden behind the main temple building had been created by the brothers' uncle, [Houjou Genan](#) . It, too, had been viciously demolished.

(This is clearly a warning from our enemy.)

Their temple was the Houjou Clan itself; its destruction carried the implicit threat that the clan would be destroyed root and branch.

He stood before the two shattered halves of his father Ujiyasu's tombstone, face scarlet and tightly-clenched fists shaking with fury.

"Ujiteru-sama! There is a witness who claims to have spotted someone suspicious here!" reported one of his men charged with intelligence-gathering, who was currently in possession of a police officer.

"What?! Did our enemy appear here?"

"Well, he said a black shadow climbed the cliff behind the main temple and suddenly disappeared midway.

"Disappeared?"

A mountain rose up behind the temple and was part of a large park called [Souun Park](#) . He could understand someone making his escape there, but to disappear midway...?

"He could not have been here in body, then...?"

"Ujiteru-sama!" called late-come Okamoto, a member of the [Oumamawari](#).

shuu .

The vassals of the Houjou clan were organized and named by the branch castles where they were stationed (i.e. the samurai stationed at [Tamanawa Castle](#) were called the Tamanawa-shuu, those at [Edo Castle](#) and [Kawagoe Castle](#) the Edo-shuu and Kawagoe-shuu, respectively—and so on). The

Oumamawari-shuu was the samurai unit placed at the Houjou main stronghold of [Odawara Castle](#) —in other words, the retainers in direct service to the head of the clan.

Okamoto had just hurried back from a survey of other victims.

"How now, what news?"

"Several guests were injured at Ryokan Street ."

Okamoto had canvassed the surrounding areas in detail. This latest attack, like the last, had targeted multiple locations at the same time. The entire area of [Hakone-Yumoto](#) , with [Souun Temple](#) as its center, had felt the impact.

"What?! Even guests? Our enemy spares not even ordinary people?" Ujiteru demanded, disgusted. "'Tis utterly unconscionable!"

[Hakone-Yumoto](#) was a prominent spa resort and sight-seeing area within the capital. It

was especially busy on weekends, when entire companies came to stay and

filled multiple hotels on occasion.

He must have known how many people would be engulfed if something like this happened here...!

"It was very like the circumstances at the [Odawara](#) principle residence, for the earthquakes were concentrated below

building foundations and caused much destruction. Happily the buildings did not collapse, so no deaths have been reported withal. Yet I do not think..."

...This will be the end of it. Ujiteru ground his teeth.

—Rather the opposite. There would likely be other locations targeted—in any case, that was what he would do in their foe's place. The Satomi assassin was not restricting his targets to the Houjou; rather, he was harming ordinary people indiscriminately, apparently in an effort to rattle them.

Because he was hiding behind his mind-projection technique, they didn't even know what he looked like. They couldn't stop him without first finding him. His aim was likely to drive them into a corner, to torment them and fan their impatience and fear.

Take [Odawara](#) or [Hakone](#) —if he had wanted to truly strike at them, his attack scope would have been magnified several times.

Ujiteru was increasingly determined to make him pay.

"Do not imagine your mind-projection will always be allowed to run rampant through this land of [Hakone](#) , Satomi. Thus much you have done: we will stand by no longer," Ujiteru declared. He commanded the [Oumamawari-shuu](#) :

"Raise a fog."

"A fog—"

"Ay. Call fog forth from [Lake Ashi](#) , that our enemy cannot send his mind wheresoever he would. Let us show him why [Mt. Hakone](#) is known to all the land as the dwelling-place of demons...!"

Ujiteru was not one to stop at halfway measures. He fought those who roused his ire to the bitter end and could not easily pull back from a challenge. He was a man who lived to gallop across the battlefield. None of those who had angered the hot-blood Ujiteru had ever escaped unscathed, and his vassals were well aware of that fact.

"[Tono](#) !"

Ujiteru's trusted retainer [Kondou Tsunahide](#) dashed through the swarm of patrol cars and their flashing red lights.

"How now, Tsunahide?"

"A messenger from the Satomi—or so he appeared—came to [Odawara](#) with this...!"

He held out a small square wooden box. A foul odor assaulted them as soon as the lid was opened.

"What...is this?"

A branch hanging with red fruit, of a variety of evergreen that grew on the mountains, lay within, next to the corpse of a mouse. What in the world...?

Ujiteru's face darkened. Tsunahide and Okamoto both held their breath, waiting for an answer, but he said only: "We must return to my brother immediately. To the car."

A milky-white fog billowed across [Lake Ashi](#) as the night brightened.

When the chill softened and the rain that had been cold enough to numb a person down to his toes warmed, mist often wreathed [Hakone](#) 's mountains 'round. In this season, rain at [Odawara](#) usually meant fog at [Hakone](#) .

But this was no ordinary fog.

Ujimasa seemed to sense it.

When [Fuuma Kotarou](#) entered the room, Ujimasa was already awake, gazing at the fog over [Komagatake](#) from the window.

"I see Ujiteru hath made his move," he commented without turning.

Ujimasa knew that this fog was no simple manifestation of the weather; it was a ghost-fog artificially created from the spiritual majesty of [Hakone](#) , capable of dispersing a projected will. Something could probably still force its way through from point-blank range, but a mind-projection sent from a distance would lose almost all effect.

At least within the fog-shrouded [Mt. Hakone](#) , the power of their foe's mind-projection would be halved or more.

"I heard our enemy hath struck the hot springs as well?"

"Yes, my lord. I believe there were injuries among those not connected to us."

Kotarou gave Ujimasa a detailed report of the information he had received from the scene.

"It seems Ujiteru-dono hath summoned the fog. It will block the simultaneous mind-projection attacks of our foe, belike, and force a direct confrontation."

"Attack me, then?"

"In all likelihood."

Their enemy's skill was considerable. If each of his mind-projections could carry such extraordinary destructive power, what, then, would his full attention be like? It was nigh impossible to imagine. The ghost-fog had countered the type of random guerilla-style attacks he had conducted up to this point, but...the danger to Ujimasa had certainly not decreased.

"Thou wilt protect me, Kotarou, wilt thou not?" Yet Ujimasa was unperturbed. "The ninja army of the Fuuma doth boast of being second to none under heaven. Thou art their leader, and would not, I think, fall to the likes of Satomi's assassin."

"I am at your command, my lord." There was no hesitation in his reply. "The assassin will not be allowed to leave [Hakone](#) with his life."

His expression remained as unchanging as that of a [Noh mask](#) .

That hint of challenge in his tone might have been captivating if he had seemed more human than statue, but for Kotarou, everything was a matter of 'practicality.' Indeed, he treated his own limbs as nothing more than tools; in his previous life, he had unhesitatingly cut off his own bound right foot in order to escape an enemy camp.

That had become even more apparent since his resurrection, in his current existence as an incorporeal spirit. His body was nothing more than an implement to be used until it broke, then abandoned; he had exchanged bodies in rapid succession to suit his convenience for whatever job needed doing. The body he now possessed, which worked well

enough for his present needs and had not yet failed, had been the only exception—but neither did he have any particular attachment to it.

Freed from the limitations (?) of being bound to a single body, Kotarou had become a yet more accomplished ninja, and found this existence perhaps even more natural than the one he had been born into in his previous life.

For most people, appearance was a basis for their self-identity. Having once selected a spirit vessel, neither Ujimasa nor Ujiteru had any intention of giving them up so easily. It had taken them time to adapt, to see those vessels as themselves.

None of that mattered to Kotarou.

He had never been particular about his appearance or fixated on which body was 'his.'

(The comparison of him to a...computer...is certainly well-founded.)

The flesh was only hardware. The soul—the software—could function in any body. And function was the only thing that mattered.

To Kotarou, the flesh had no other purpose.

But *that* was why he was without flaw. There was nothing extraneous or wasted in his actions, calculated for maximum effectiveness and efficiency towards reaching his objective. It was a superior existence for a pragmatist. His long pale face may not hold any trace of warmth, but because he lacked a 'self,' neither could he be waylaid by foolish sentiment. He was not torn by hatred, envy, yearning. His judgment was unshakeable. —And inflexible though he might be, that fact also meant that he would never betray them.

"I believe we suit each other well, Kotarou."

Ujimasa seated himself on the sofa.

"Suit...?"

"Ay, such is my feeling. I feel at ease with thee. Ujiteru vexes me betimes."

For Ujiteru, his emotions, his loves and hates came before everything else. That was why he sometimes collided headlong into reason and landed himself in such quandaries. Not so for Kotarou. Could Ujiteru see how Kotarou slipped past those things as easily as he slipped

through walls? Perhaps Ujiteru reacted so strongly to everything because he was too divided (though Ujimasa thought the ratio of those divisions well-proportioned).

"What thinkest thou of Ujiteru?" Ujimasa inquired as casually as if he were playing a word game. "Does he not vex thee?"

"He does not vex me, but..." Kotarou replied soberly, "I think he doth waste too much energy on trivialities."

"Trivialities?"

"He places inordinate energy where 'tis not needed. Such a man is he. If he wert not so, I believe he could become the greatest commander of the era."

Kotarou told him about [Hachiouji](#) . Because Ujiteru had insisted that he not speak of it, he had not yet reported the incident to Ujimasa.

"Trivialities, hmm?"

Ujimasa smiled his understanding—a faint smile that seemed to imply he had already guessed at Ujiteru's actions.

—"How very like thee. ...Then do I waste no energy?"

Kotarou was silent.

Ujimasa smiled again.

What Kotarou had told him made him feel strangely like they understood each other—as if a load had been lifted from his mind.

This man was able to acknowledge—affirm—even the worst parts of himself. Ujimasa was grateful for that.

"...I trust thou'll kill Satomi's assassin for me, Kotarou?"

"Ujimasa-dono."

"Nay, not only Satomi, but all who strike at us out of the hatred and bitterness they bear from their past lives."

They flitted into Ujimasa's mind...his youngest brother among them. Ujimasa shook his head as if to deny the thought.

"If indeed thou art the greatest ninja in the world—" Ujimasa looked steadily at Kotarou. "—thou wilt be able to protect me."

"Yes, my lord," Kotarou said, his tone transforming the words into an 'But of course.' "You are the lord of the Houjou. Until Lord Ujiyasu is resurrected, you shall be as Lord Ujiyasu to me."

"Ay. I will trust in thee, Kotarou."

A few minutes later...

A clamor erupted at the bottom of the stairs, and someone ascended at a dead run.

—"Aniue ! Look...!"

Ujiteru burst into the room and without preface or preamble showed Ujimasa the box they had received from their foe.

"Our enemy brought it to us, to be given to thee," Ujiteru explained before Ujimasa could ask.

"What?"

He opened the box to see the strange withered branch and the corpse of the mouse. Ujimasa immediately understood that they held far more meaning than simple harassment.

"This is...!"

"Aniue ! What in the world...?!"

Ujimasa's grim expression darkened further. There was no doubt at all that it was a bold declaration of his identity from the assassin.

This plant with its red fruit seemed to hold some special significance for Ujimasa.

Seeing the change in his brother's face, Ujiteru asked from beside him, "Ainue. Dost thou...mayhap...perceive the true identity of the sender? Or hast thou some inkling...?"

Ujimasa moaned, his fine-drawn brows creasing, "'Tis Matsuda."

"Eh...?" Ujiteru asked.

Though the muttered words had been so low as to be inaudible, Ujimasa did not say the name a second time. The composure returned to his face and he handed Kotarou the box.

"Burn it with the raw garbage. I know now of our enemy's motive."

"But Aniue ...!"

"Return to [Odawara](#) , Ujiteru. 'Tis enough for Kotarou to remain here with me."

"Nay, [Aniue](#) !" Ujiteru had no intention of leaving. "I will stay to give that impudent assassin a proper welcome!"

"I have said it is not necessary."

"Ujikuni fortifies [Odawara Castle](#) 's defenses as we speak. Therefore let me add my strength to the protection of [Hakone](#) . [Hakone](#) is the fortress of the Houjou. Our troops cannot be roused to action without [Houjou Ujiteru](#) at their head!"

"Ujiteru."

Now that Ujimasa had a good idea as to the identity of the assassin, he could also guess that the motive was a personal grudge towards him. No matter where their enemy was, he would certainly strike at Ujimasa.

And if he was the target, then anyone with him would also be in extreme danger. He wanted Ujiteru at [Odawara](#) , to lead the Houjou in case anything should happen to him.

But Ujiteru, sensing the extraordinary threat to Ujimasa, was adamantly refusing to leave. It didn't matter to him that the most elite of the Fuuma were guarding his brother; he felt uneasy unless he could be there as well.

"I will be thy right arm! Well do I know my duty; it lies in the protection of thee, my brother and my lord! I cannot be dissuaded. I will remain, [Aniue](#) !"

A complex mass of emotions ran across Ujimasa's face.

In the end, he moved to leave the room without making any reply.

"Aniue !"

"Return to Odawara immediately, Ujiteru. That is a command."

"...!"

The powerful thrust present in Ujimasa's voice at such times struck Ujiteru dumb. He stared at his brother's back as Ujimasa walked out the door, leaving his speechless younger brother behind. Ujiteru groaned softly as the door slid shut.

The fog obscured his entire field of vision.

The Houjou ghost-fog covered the entire region of Hakone today, wreathing and partially concealing Komagatake , Kamiyama , and Kanmurigatake , the peaks overlooking the beautiful Lake Ashi .

"So multiple mind-projections has now lost its efficacy."

He could see nothing through the strange, thick fog that seemed to coil around him at the summit of Komagatake . He glared with annoyance down into the blank whiteness where Lake Ashi should be.

Hakone Mototsumiya at the summit of Komagatake was the rear shrine of Hakone Shrine , built here for the remote worship of the sacred Kamiyama

The unshaven man wearing round-edged sunglasses had been staring into

the depths of the fog for some time from the foot of the shrine archway. At an elevation of 1300 meters, it was easy to perceive that the spot he had chosen would normally overlook the entire [Hakone](#) region. The bamboo grass so characteristic of the [Hakone](#) peaks grew in abundance near the summit, but no trees obscured the view, making it a perfect command center.

"I see. They're trying to scatter the mind-projections with this fog."

It wasn't known as the Demon's Precipice for nothing. So they would not allow him to continue doing whatever he wanted. The man in the army jacket tsiked.

"Damn you, Houjou. Playing your little tricks—..."

The peak of [Komagatake](#) was the center of the hallowed ground of [Hakone](#). The holy evergreen-crowned mountain of [Kamiyama](#) towered to its north. It had been a holy place to the mountain-worship

faith since ancient times and could be called the birthplace of the sacred land of [Hakone](#). The mountain was easily accessible now by cable car, but in those days only the followers of the [Shugen](#) faith and the most zealous worshipers dared its heights.

[Komagatake](#) was the root of the [Hakone Shrine](#) so revered by the Houjou. [Holy Priest Mangan](#), the shrine's founder, had entered the mountain and built [Hakone Shrine](#) on this land according to a revelation he had received after three years of ascetic practice.

The assassin of the Satomi had boldly selected [Komagatake](#) as his base

for the mind-projection attacks on the Houjou.

"Humph... Well, the Houjou are certainly no fools. But do they really think something like this can stop me?"

The man gave a small chuckle, gaze still fixed on the world beneath the fog with all the arrogance of a conquer upon a subjugated land.

"We shall see. ...You cannot run or hide from me, [Houjou Ujimasa](#) . Prepare yourself: I am going to torment you to my heart's content."

He crushed the ragged red fruit in his hand in a violent movement.

"...Then I'm going to tear off your head."

Ultramarine Chapter 6: From the Precipice of the Demon's Lair

In the end Ujiteru ignored Ujimasa's command and remained at [Hakone](#) while Ujimasa shut himself in his room.

The day was coming to its end. The fog seemed to have contained the mind-projection attacks, but had also thrown the entire region of [Hakone](#) into traffic gridlock. The national highways were congested beyond belief, and accidents were a frequent occurrence.

"We cannot sustain this for long."

Ujiteru had met [Tsunashige](#) and [Kotarou](#) in the room overlooking the lake to discuss their strategy going

forward. One of Kotarou's subordinates entered and reported something to him. He waited until they were alone again before speaking.

"We have confirmed it: the assassin sends his mind-projections forth from the summit of [Komagatake](#) ."

"What? From [Komagatake](#) ?"

"Yes. Our probe hath determined a match 'tween the residual <<energy>> at [Komagatake](#) and the sites of attack."

"Wretch!" Tsunashige struck the table with his fist. -"From [Mototsumiya](#) , o' all places...! He dares mock the Houjou!"

"We have the scent, but have yet to snare the assassin himself. Still, I believe he must know we are here."

Or perhaps he was already close at hand.

"...We cannot continue in this manner," Ujiteru stated succinctly by the window, glaring at the outer ring of the crater on the opposite shore. He turned to the others. "Nothing is ended. 'Tis beyond my bearing to do naught but wait for another attack from our skulking enemy. The next attack should be ours, Uncle!"

"Wilt thou then set out to exterminate a single mouse in this wide land of [Hakone](#)?" Tsunashige, seated on the sofa with his arms crossed, returned. "Mayhap if he wert but a mere possessing spirit—but he is [kanshousha](#). With the level of power he commands, I do not think you will catch him with a barrier and a probe-web."

"I will lure him out." Ujiteru thrust his fists out in front of his chest. "I will act as decoy for my brother. We will exchange spirit vessels, and I will set out a trap for the enemy. With my brother's body I will draw the assassin's attention and lure him to a place of our choosing, then snare him for the kill."

"The idea hath merit, but..." Tsunashiga objected, "though Ujimasa be safe, thou'lt place his spirit vessel in danger."

"Even if the worst falls and my brother's vessel is lost, his soul will be safe."

"No, it will not do. We cannot relinquish Ujimasa's vessel. This man, Akiba Noriaki, is necessary for the future of the Houjou."

Publicly, Akiba belonged to the board of directors of a well-known business group involved in the hotel and transportation industries and

was also managing director of a large hotel chain. Behind the scenes, his connections had also made him an influential voice in the political and financial worlds. Ujimasa was using his social position to create a foothold for the Houjou to eventually attain the power to move the country.

"We yet stand but at the mid-point. We must not lose the body of this man, this Akiba. We cannot offer him up simply as bait. I cannot give my consent to this scheme."

"But..."

"Neither will Ujimasa agree to it."

To have Ujiteru serve as his decoy...

Tsunashige could understand Ujimasa's true character on a deeper level than Ujiteru. As the head of the Houjou, though his words were sometimes unforgivably "cold"—

(He probably...)

He would choose to face his enemy with sword in hand rather than allow Ujiteru to sacrifice himself as bait.

(Such a man is Ujimasa.)

But there were few who could truly understand him. Even Tsunashige sometimes misread him. He was a man with a disposition all disadvantageous to himself, Tsunashige thought.

(If only he had Oubaiin -dono at his side, at least...)

Ujimasa's wife, Oubaiin , Takeda Shingen 's eldest daughter, had been sent as hostage to Sagami and made Ujimasa's wife upon the formation of the alliance between Kai , Sagami , and Suruga . She had been returned upon the severing of the alliance and died of illness a short while after.

Though they had both been very young, Ujimasa had cared for her greatly. They had six children between them during the mere ten years of their marriage. Common as it had been in the world of the Sengoku , how had they felt when the time had come for them to part?

Tsunashige knew he had cherished her even afterwards. When the Houjou formed their second alliance with Takeda, Ujimasa built a sub-temple at Souun Temple for her ashes. Her name had also been recorded at their family temple at Mt. Kouya .

(The one who truly understood Ujimasa...)

Had perhaps been Oubaiin alone.

(And this matter with Saburou as well...)

Tsunashige shook his head as he recalled Ujimasa's words from the day before. ...Such a difficult, difficult deposition, he thought.

He looked at Ujiteru beside him.

The Houjou second son was pacing with cross aimlessness next to the window.

"...Kotarou. What thinkest thou? Dost thou agree with mine uncle on the impossibility of this scheme?"

Kotarou looked at him.

"It is not impossible."

"What?"

"The Fuuma can protect the vessel. And if we rather bring the battle to a place of greater advantage than take the defensive here, a better chance of success will our strategy have. It matters not how familiar our enemy is with the terrain, for he will ever be as a foreigner in the backyard of the Fuuma. I agree with Ujiteru-dono: 'twould be an effective strategy to lure out our foe."

Kotarou's mechanical pronouncement held no trace of eagerness or exaggeration, or indeed emotion of any kind. His judgment was based entirely on their capabilities, and could be trusted implicitly. His concise responses were unerringly accurate.

"I see." Ujiteru nodded firmly and headed for the door.

"Ujiteru, whither goest thou?"

"To persuade my brother to lend me his spirit vessel for a little time."

"Be not so hasty!"

"'Tis [Aniue](#) we must protect, Uncle!" Ujiteru responded forcefully. "Let him change

as many vessels as necessary, but there is only one of my brother! Let me be the knave then, if I must: if that is how I may protect him! I am

certain all my brothers would feel the same...ay, even Saburou!"

The corners of Tsunashige's lips tightened.

Pain flashed across Ujiteru's face.

"Saburou surely... fought for **Aniue** too, in **Echigo** . And...sacrificed his life for it."

"Ujiteru..."

"**Aniue** ,

too, lives in such hope of reunion with Saburou. Until we brothers are together again, I will let nothing interfere—nay not even the gods Themselves."

(Ujiteru, Ujimasa...) Tsunashige's eyes narrowed slightly. (...hopes not for such a reunion.)

He hopes only to remove the threat that is Saburou Kagetora.

Though the words rose to his throat, they did not leave his lips. Ujiteru left the room with Kotarou.

(Ujiteru...) Tsunashige thought—

Your brother is not the same as you.

It is as everyone says: for him, your youngest brother is naught but a chess piece in this battle. He thinks not of his feelings.

To him, Saburou is only a tool.

(Please recognize this side of your brother, Ujiteru...)

If you do not...

It is Ujimasa himself that you will hurt.

A drop of water struck the window.

Rain began to fall.

The bamboo grass growing nearby bowed with the weight of their rain-drenched leaves.

Ujimasa gazed at them through the large windows facing the garden, listening to the raindrops falling from the water pipes. He watched until a droplet collecting on a leaf grew heavy enough to slip off before raising his gaze skyward.

The wound on his right shoulder ached distantly. He rubbed it lightly.

"Thou didst never much show Saburou thy smile, I think?"

He recalled Ujiteru's words.

(Is it because of Ujikuni...?)

Because of Ujikuni's encounter with Uesugi's [Yasha-shuu](#) ?—the memories flashed through his mind.

"Art thou not Saburou's elder brother...?!"

(Thou wast loved by all, Saburou.)

Was it strange that his thoughts had turned in such a direction?

To his youngest brother, given as a hostage to Kai in his infancy, returned, then sent off again to Echigo ...

The seven Houjou brothers had been born from the same mother: Zuikeiin ,

much-beloved wife of Ujiyasu, and all of them brought up healthy and strong in the midst of that loving family. ...And though in the Sengoku discord sometimes arose between brothers born to different mothers and exploded into civil strife, there had been no such conflict for the Houjou.

Between them there had existed a completely natural accord.

For these brothers raised together, their families had been a part of themselves. And so it still was for Ujiteru and Ujikuni.

But the era had been too cruel to allow Ujimasa to continue that same way.

As successor to the Houjou Clan, he had learned his lessons in the mercilessness of the warring world in which they lived at his father's side—knowledge branded into his very skin. He had been raised with the relentless awareness of the burdens borne by the head of a clan, and before he knew it had lost the ability to lay bare his heart like Ujiteru and the others.

He had seen with his own eyes too much tragedy arisen from blood ties

among those who had lived in the Sengoku .

Disputes and in-fighting, betrayal and blood, the struggle for survival. Such storms could grow large enough to engulf his own family in all their horror at any time. That was the world in which Ujimasa had lived as the head of a nation.

"Aniue is so cold...!"

('Tis true, Ujiteru.) Ujimasa answered silently in his mind.

Ujimasa refused to apologize for that—nor did he feel any pangs of conscience at such rebukes.

(I have not thy attachment for Saburou.)

To Ujimasa, Saburou was different.

Or—perhaps "foreign" would be more accurate.

Saburou, who had spent too much of his early childhood with the Takeda, was different from his other brothers, and that awareness had manifested in many forms. The suspicion drilled into the children of the Sengoku had lit a "caution signal" over this alien brother.

Ujimasa didn't understand it clearly. What he did know was that he had never been able to feel that Saburou was "one of them."

Even Saburou had been conscious of how much he acted like an outsider.

That, too, had prevented him from becoming comfortable with Ujimasa.

Ujimasa could still recall such a scene after Saburou had returned from the Takeda.

He had been chasing a butterfly that day and gotten lost on the grounds of Ujimasa's residence.

Hearing the laughing shouts carried on the wind, Ujimasa had stepped out into the garden. There he came across Saburou, who had crossed the hedge in pursuit of the butterfly.

He would never forget Saburou's expression in that moment.

Fear had completely blotted out the sparkle from the chase in his eyes as he looked up at Ujimasa. It was an expression he never wore even in front of their father. ...Tension had stiffened his handsome still-young face, as if he had come upon someone he should not have.

Children reacted as they felt.

And Ujimasa knew that like him, Saburou did not think of Ujimasa as "a part of himself."

He could still recall the dull grating of his heart.

The yellow butterfly landed on Ujimasa's shoulder as he stood there motionlessly. He cupped it in his hand and held it out to Saburou, who extended his hand as timidly as if Ujimasa were a stranger. Perhaps because of that hesitancy, the butterfly slipped through their hands as they touched and flew up into the blue sky.

Thinking back on it, that had perhaps been the first and last time he had ever touched his brother.

Our fingers look so alike.

Why did he remember feeling so well?

The howling of the wind recalled Ujimasa to himself. The wind and rain had both increased in strength outside.

(A tempest approaches...)

Ujimasa tucked the image of his youngest brother away again deep inside and forcefully turned his thoughts to the problems at hand.

How could he break this deadlock?

(What trouble hath come to our doorstep, indeed...)

Their foe had even sent that box to attract Ujimasa's attention—prompted, as usual, by a brazen arrogance that did not know its place. He was not one jot less troublesome now than in his previous life, Ujimasa thought; even death seemed to have failed to cure that obstinacy. Ujimasa tsked in annoyance. It was a pertinacity that belonged to a snake rather than a 'mouse.'

(We must allow no innocent bystanders to be dragged into this absurd melodrama of a personal grudge.)

But he had no easy moves to hand. If he acted in an unexpected manner, their foe would only grow more impudent still—and Ujimasa could not afford to let anything happen to his body. There were his

responsibilities as clan head, and there was pride.

(But how do we strike?)

What would his father Ujiyasu have done? he wondered—and pulled himself up short.

He had not stopped thinking in that way, he realized bitterly.

(I am not free even in death...)

His father's shadow...had not disappeared.

He could not recall when it had been. Ujiyasu had taken him to the seashore one night and said, looking up at the night sky:

"That is the Great Dipper, Ujimasa.

We who live as warriors pray to the Great Dipper for fortune in war.

Thou, Ujimasa, and thy brothers are those seven brilliant stars.

You seven, born beneath the guardian god of warriors, must combine your strengths in one to live in this world of the [Sengoku](#) . Think thou upon that every time thou look'st upon those stars."

So his father had told him.

(The Great Dipper is the constellation of the Houjou...)

Thoughts of his youngest brother rose again in his mind. He pushed them away, brows creasing.

As he deliberated, arms crossed with his back to the screen door—

One of his attendants addressed him from the other side: "Tono! Ujiteru-sama is—"

He was cut off by Ujiteru himself throwing open the door and entering the room.

"Ujiteru."

"Aniue .

There is a matter of which I wouldst speak with thee." Ujiteru's face bore an extremely serious expression. "I pray thee lend thine ear."

But Ujimasa would not consent to Ujiteru's proposal to become his decoy to lure their foe into open battle.

"Why, Aniue ?!"

Ujiteru flared as expected. "I am certain there is no better strategy—and so Kotarou agrees! The Fuuma have sworn to protect the spirit vessel! Or hast thou so little faith in me?!"

"Nay," Ujimasa replied calmly. "'Tis not that I do not trust in thee—I mean only that you should not be stirred by the provocation of such a fellow."

"Such a fellow? Then, Aniue , thou dost know Satomi's assassin. Who is he? Tell me, I prithee!"

"A vassal of the Houjou, once."

"He was our..." Ujiteru looked at his brother incredulously. "Say on. How...?"

"He left the Houjou and turned to Satomi. A personal grudge hath he conceived against me. Such a fellow he is and nothing more. Though it be not to the liking of one who so loves battle, I cannot send thee against his like."

"But [Aniue](#) ! That man wouldst take thy life for that grudge!"

"'Tis beneath our dignity," Ujimasa declared unbendingly. "'Twould be a blot on our name if the clan head should raise such force 'gainst a single defector. Thou art Ujimasa's brother. Thou must not move."

—"But...!"

Ujiteru was confounded. More than anything else, Ujimasa detested that which wounded his pride. And once he decided on something, changing his mind was nigh impossible.

But in this instance his obstinacy would be short-lived.

As soon as silence settled within the room, they heard a clamor from the retainers down the corridor. A moment later, there was a jostling right outside the room before one of the retainers threw open the door without preamble and flew inside.

Ujiteru's trusted vassal, [Kondou Tsunahide](#) , interrupted the brothers glaring at each other.

"What hath happened?!"

"Tono !

A most serious matter!" Kondou dropped to one knee in breathless, agitated haste and reported, "I was told just a little time ago of a number of large incidents caused by the assassin!"

"What?! Say on!"

"The cable of the [Hakone aerial lift](#) between Oowaku Valley and Mt. Souun was severed, and several people killed when the car fell into the valley! At the same time, the rail bridge of the [Hakone Tozan Railway](#) between Tounosawa and Oohiradai was destroyed, and the car traveling upon it thrown off, killing many more...!"

Unable to contain himself, Ujiteru turned to Ujimasa, howling, "Aniueeee!"

Ujimasa's eyes were wide with shock.

He was utterly speechless, frozen so completely that it was as if he had forgotten how to breathe.

Then Ujiteru saw the rage filling his eyes. A vein throbbed at his temple as his cheeks trembled minutely. As their vassals looked on, Ujimasa's lips compressed into a single thin, purple line. His teeth were clenched so tightly that they were in danger of being ground to dust. He began to shake violently.

"Heh...heheh...heh...hahah..."

And then came the laughter. It was so unexpected, out of a face so indescribably twisted, that it startled and frightened Ujiteru. For a

moment he feared that Ujimasa had gone mad.

..."Ah...so it hath come to this..."

Ujimasa pressed a hand against a face, a demonic, eerie light glinting in the depths of his eyes.

"Aniue ..."

"A little time more, and I would have forgotten..." Ujimasa growled, his shaking shoulders betraying his continued laughter. "Here amongst the people of this era, I would have...forgotten. That we are...people of the Sengoku ..."

"Aniue ."

"I have remembered...I have remembered at last. The ways of the Sengoku ..."

Through the gaps between his fingers Ujiteru could see the tiny half-mad light glittering in his eyes. By the time the laughter trailed off and finally died, his face had taken on a demon god's fearsome visage.

"We who lived in the Sengoku ...know of no way but battle." Ujimasa muttered in a stifled voice, slowly moving the hand away from his face. "...Let us answer as he wishes."

Ujimasa, donning the countenance of the general once more, had made his decision. Ujiteru gathered himself, braced by that familiar expression of old.

So began a war of vengeance between men who had lived with—and lived for—battle.

Ultramarine Chapter 7: The Eighth Star

It wasn't until the next morning that there was evidence of any movement from the Houjou estate at [Lake Ashi](#) .

The rain had finally stopped, and fog shrouded the area. At just past six am, the black Diamante outfitted with special glass used exclusively by Ujimasa drove up to the front entrance from the garage, followed by two other vehicles. Ujimasa left the grounds around thirty minutes later in a flurry of movement from the Houjou vassals, accompanied by Ujiteru.

Ujimasa, dressed in the suit he normally wore in public, took the seat behind the driver. A trusted retainer who was acting as his bodyguard climbed in with him.

Tsunashige appeared at the front entrance to see them off.

Ujiteru peered into the car and exchanged a few words with Ujimasa. The door closed, and Ujiteru and Tsunashige took a few steps back and bowed.

The Diamante glided out the gates. Ujiteru climbed into the next car, and it and the remaining vehicle set off together after Ujimasa.

Tsunashige gazed after the cars until they moved out of sight before finally going back inside.

Another man was watching that procession from a vantage point slightly

above the estate.

"...So they're running off with their tails between their legs, eh?"

Lowering his binoculars, the man leaned back against the four-wheel drive parked next to him.

"You've got no place to hide. You can't escape from our eyes, [Houjou Ujimasa](#) ."

Ujimasa's car rounded [Lake Ashi](#) toward the east. Their destination wasn't [Odawara](#) , then, since they weren't heading for the entrance to New [Hakone](#) Road .

The man climbed into the four-wheel drive, hurriedly started the engine, and stepped on the gas. The car sprang over mud puddles, beast-like, after the car in the distance.

Ujimasa's car traced the road along the lake shore. At first he thought they were heading towards [Hakone Shrine](#) , but they passed it and kept to the eastern bank of [Lake Ashi](#) on the road that ran along the foot of [Komagatake](#) and [Kamiyama](#) toward the Back Lake.

Ujiteru followed.

Their destination was still unclear. Where were they headed? ...Were they taking a detour to attempt to shake off the assassin?

The fog had so deteriorated road conditions that without fog-lights, they would not be able to see either the road ahead or oncoming traffic.

(Are they going to ground somewhere else...?)

The four-wheel drive followed right on Ujiteru's tail. In this fog, he risked losing them if he allowed any distance at all between them.

Though he feared Ujimasa might elude him if he pulled away, he sensed that the cars continued to follow one another as closely as the units of a guard convoy. The last car seemed to have been assigned the lead, and the three Houjou cars traveled due north in tight formation.

At the three-way junction before the Back Lake they turned right onto the mountain-side road. A

luxuriant forest pressed up against the road on both sides, and above it was the cable of the [Hakone](#) Ropeway—the same one on which the fall had occurred.

The aerial lift stretched from Mt. Souun to Tougendai, a total of four kilometers, and reached an elevation of 130 meters between [Oowaku Valley](#) and Mt. Souun. Bare reddish-brown rock covered the precipitous floor of [Oowaku Valley](#), formed from the remains of [Kamiyama](#)'s volcano. It was here that the lift had fallen.

Its sturdy line had been torn off by an enormous force—an event unlikely to have been caused by accident.

It had happened near evening, when traffic was light, but even so forty people had fallen to their deaths.

The impact caused by the severance of the cable had destroyed the cableway. The station and supports had collapsed, and they and the heart-wrenching wreckage of the tram could still be seen strewn about.

It had been an inconceivable catastrophe, and its reason was beyond anyone's imagining. For who could believe that it had been caused by the pure will of a single person?

Through the fog-enshrouded national forest the cars traveled, heading for the place of tragedy that [Oowaku Valley](#) had become. The four-wheel drive followed.

Ujiteru had, of course, noted the pursuing vehicle. Seated with arms crossed in the back seat, he fixed his gaze calmly on the car in the back-view mirror.

The fog gradually grew thicker.

(Guh...)

The man in the four-wheel drive strained to see ahead. Something was happening in the line of cars as they approached the bus stop at Ubako . Ujiteru's car had turned on its right indicator. It was the only one to do so.

(What...)

Ujiteru's car moved over to the right as if to yield the road to him—but Ujimasa's car gave no sign of turning. Though wondering what was happening, the man's hands were motionless on the wheel. Ujiteru's car entered the narrow road to his right while the other two cars drove on straight ahead. Ujiteru and Ujimasa had split up. Without Ujiteru's car acting as shield behind him, the four-wheel drive was able to slide up right behind Ujimasa.

(Strange.)

Suspicious as he might be about Ujiteru's actions, the road ahead was unforked for some distance. And his target was right in front of him. He could even see Ujimasa in the back seat.

(Fools...)

He could not pass up this chance.

I'll crush both their cars, the man muttered to himself, and stepped on the accelerator. The gap between the cars instantly closed. But the two cars ahead showed neither concern nor any signs of speeding up.

(Can it really be possible that they just haven't noticed me?)

In that case he would put everything into one strike. His hands tightened on the steering wheel. In that instant—

(What...?!)

Something odd was happening to the car in front of him. Fog suddenly obscured its tail-lights, separating it into prismatic colors—and the car frame blurred into two, then three.

For a moment he thought it was his eyes that were blurring, but no—it was the car being reflected diffusely in the fog, image layering over image until he felt as if he were looking at it through a kaleidoscope.

(What the hell is this...?!)

The man hurriedly stepped on the gas as the car tail in front of him

began to disappear into the fog. But no matter how hard he pushed, he could not close the gap between them. Ujimasa's car gradually vanished into the haze. Ujimasa hadn't accelerated—no, it was he who could not pick up speed.

"Damn it! Damn it...!"

In a delirium, he pressed the accelerator to the floor, but received no response at all. Rainbow-colored mist lingered in the wake of Ujimasa's car as it drove straight ahead. The four-wheel drive no longer knew where it was going. In the fog, he felt as if he had lost his way in a bank of clouds. The only thing he could see was the orange tail lights of the car in front of him; both the center line and the guardrail had disappeared from his field of vision.

(What...the hell...?!)

Pure whiteness enfolded him; he could no longer distinguish up from down, left from right. His equilibrium had crumbled to pieces. He could only lose himself in the chase, grasping at the sight of the tail lights ahead of him.

"!"

A horn blasted sharply out of the miasma directly in front of him.

Ujimasa's vehicle disappeared from his sight the instant he abruptly regained sensation and a sense of reality. In its place—a truck coming at him head-on...!

"What!"

He reflexively cut the wheel left. His side mirror was torn off as the truck grazed past him, inches apart, accompanied by another horn blast like a beast's roar tearing through the fog.

"Gwah...!"

He somehow managed to right the car after scraping past the guardrail and picked up speed again. Focus! he told himself, and concentrated his attention on the road ahead. That had been an illusion conjured by the ghost-fog. He'd fallen into their spell, been ensnared by the illusion.

(Don't be taken in so easily...!)

To keep from losing his balance again, he focused all his concentration between his eyes and stepped on the accelerator. He soon caught up to his opponent's tail and surged forward to run side-by-side with the Diamante.

He glared at Ujimasa in the back seat. Ujimasa, who until that point had not given him a single glance—had, in fact, appeared to be completely unaware of his presence, suddenly looked directly at him.

And smiled faintly.

(You...!)

That arrogance enraged him.

(I'll wipe that look off your face so completely you'll never be able to put it

back on!)

And he swung the car hard, intending to ram into Ujimasa and run him off the road—

"!"

The Diamante suddenly disappeared as if swallowed into the fog.

"Wh...!"

He was heading straight for the guardrail! The realization that the road had curved came a second after the spin of the wheel—and a second

too late. Even immediately hitting the brakes was not enough to stop him from plowing into the rail head-on.

There was a tremendous crash.

It dented the guardrail, shattered all the windows, and crushed the front of his car. The man crawled out of the driver's seat as smoke poured out of the engine. He had banged his forehead against the steering wheel, and it was already swelling with a dark-red bruise.

"Goddammit!"

The man abandoned the now-useless vehicle.

"Cursed Houjou, how dare you play around with me like this...!"

Ujimasa was standing right in front of him, looking at him in silence, no trace of mockery or provocation on his face.

The man froze for an instant. Ujimasa abruptly turned his back and walked away. The man stood.

"Wait! Damn you, Houjou Ujimasa !"

he howled, striking out with his will. But Ujimasa calmly walked off into the fog as if the attack had disappeared into thin air before reaching him. The man flung out his will again and again, but received no reaction whatsoever. Ujimasa had not even created a <<goshinha >>

"Dammit! Why?!"

Enraged, he stood and pressed the attack, but struck only the asphalt or the guardrail. Nothing touched Ujimasa. The man chased after Ujimasa, shielding his injured body, but Ujimasa continued to walk away, refusing to engage.

"Wait! Wait, damn you, Houjou Ujimasa !"

He pursued Ujimasa deliriously, a relentless pertinacity in his bloodshot eyes, but could not shorten the distance between them.

"What is the meaning of this, Houjouuuuuu!" he yelled.

How far had he come? The fog swirled around him as thick as milk here—and Ujimasa had disappeared.

"!"

The man suddenly stopped dead. The reek of sulfur struck his nose as the fog receded from the area around his feet to reveal ocher soil.

The fog drew back. He was standing in a wide valley containing the remains of a gigantic landslide. Countless erosion-control dams rose up its slopes as far as the eye could see. Vents of white vapor dotted the bare yellow soil and continued a great distance up the slope.

No—no simple vapor this, but volcanic gas: the source of the sulfur scent and perhaps also the reason the surrounding area was so barren and desolate.

(This is...)

"We welcome thee to Hell, Assassin of the Satomi," said a man's voice next to him.

"!"

He whirled.

"You...!"

It was not Ujimasa, but Ujiteru. Had he not gone off in another direction earlier?

"It doth appear thine eyes were wonderfully confounded by our illusions."

"Wh...where is this?"

"The great Hell of [Hakone](#) ; 'tis called [Oowaku Valley](#) now."

The man started. How had he gotten here?

"My brother is not here."

"What?"

"Didst thou enjoy thy taste of the beguilement arts of the Fuuma? Thou didst see my turning light at the three-way junction, was it not so? 'Twas there the suggestion was cast on thee, not unlike the chant of a hypnotist—'one, two, there.' In that moment didst thou fall into the spell. Thou hast chased an illusion of my brother all this time."

"An illusion..."

"Ay, for so did our suggestion lead thee to believe. Yet my brother never stepped into that car."

"!"

The man's eyes widened.

"Never stepped in?! Don't try to lie to me. I saw Ujimasa leave the estate with my own eyes! He's probably here right now."

"Am I the one of whom thou speakest?"

He looked up the slope at the source of the voice. A man stood looking down at him from the viewing platform jutting out from the path that continued past the parking lot of the lift station. —There was no mistake. It was Ujimasa.

"Ujimasa! You...!"

"Look again. I am not Ujimasa—" Ujimasa said. "Art thou so taken by the outside appearance of things, [onshou](#) of the [Sengoku](#) though thou might be?"

"What?"

"I am not [Houjou Ujimasa](#) ," he repeated. "Art thou still ignorant of my meaning? Ujimasa hath indeed worn this flesh, but 'tis not he inside now. I am [Houjou Ujimasa](#) 's double. Possession of a spirit vessel is most convenient—far more so than [kanshou](#) . I borrowed the body of this man called Akiba from my lord some time ago. ...Thou who art [kanshousha](#) did not see through this trick."

"That can't be. But...!"

It was not that the assassin had not thought of the possibility, but because he had known how important the vessel's social status and caliber (for the possessing spirit could add the spiritual power of the vessel to his own) were to the Houjou, he had assumed that they would never chance losing it and therefore would never dare use it like this as a decoy.

He'd been double-bluffed.

"Then you're...! Who the hell are you?!"

"Ujimasa hath now taken my former body at [Lake Ashi](#) ."

"What?"

"How disappointed thou must be, Assassin, for thou hast been led here on a wild goose chase."

Ujiteru stepped forward. His voice, though quiet, was filled with challenge and the menace of incipient violence. The assassin spun,

startled.

"You tricked me!"

"Ah, but thou hast only thyself to blame for being so foolish. Such misdirection was common in the [Sengoku](#) . Shouldst thou not feel shame for failing to make the distinction between spirits, Matsuda?"

The air wavered around Ujiteru in a flare of <<energy>>. <<Power>> filled his body.

"Matsuda Katsuhide. Born though thou wast to a family that served the Houjou for generations, thou didst turn thy back on us to enter the service of the Satomi... Thou didst ever misjudge thine own estimate—wert thou so mortified that my brother didst never bestow the 'masa' character on thee from his name...?!"

The man sucked in a breath. So Ujiteru already knew his true identity.

"Thou cursed fool! Dost thou know how many thy disloyalty led into needless deaths at the [Battle of Mihunedai](#) ? Such unjustified resentment is the height of folly!"

"Shut up! You're one to talk!" Katsuhide yelled, face flushing. "When you were so afraid of our power, of us taking over the country! You took the land of the Matsuda Clan and treated us like lowly vassals... Your schemes were so obvious. You feared us! That was how much you feared us! O pathetic Houjou—it's because the land was entrusted to an incompetent fool like *him* that the Houjou was destroyed!"

"Thou wretch." Ujiteru looked at Katsuhide coldly. "If such is what

thou dost truly believe, then 'tis I who must pity thee. Even ignorance cannot excuse the delusions of thy conceit. I wish not to squander my precious time on thee... But I see I must give thee a true taste of Hell."

"Wh...at..."

"Here lies the former volcano of [Kamiyama](#) , highest peak of [Hakone](#) . It was once called Hell. 'Tis Hell where criminals are sent, but thou—thou didst come here of thine own will. We are the demons of Hell! Here wilt thou taste remorse for thy crimes!"

"Curse you...!"

Intense flames erupted from the man's body. Ujiteru likewise gathered all his rage at his core and used it to feed his <<power>>.

"Look around thee, for the Hell of [Hakone](#) shall be thy parting view of this world!"

"!"

Katsuhide went to the offensive, striking first with a mass of concentrated will. It exploded against the strong <<[goshinheki](#) >> shield Ujiteru wove around his arm. Plasmatic light scattered in all directions and burned for a moment in the air.

"Feh!"

The strike had been heavy but sharp: the feeling of a hatchet rather than a knife.

Ujiteru sprinted for the erosion-control dam on the slope to his upper right. The assassin shot his will like a machine gun at him, a flurry of hatchet-bolts. His <<goshinheki >> could not absorb the entire impact—he would be sent flying if he were not careful.

"!"

Something caught unexpectedly at Ujiteru's foot, and he pitched forward. An unseen hand had grabbed his ankle.

"Guh...uwaaaaugh!"

His muscles screamed as a terrible power pulled on his ankle with enough force to wrench his leg off.

"Waaaaaaugh!"

Wresting against the invisible hand even as his bones grated and joints howled, Ujiteru desperately countered Katsuhide's power with his own. The air shimmered with tension. Katsuhide seemed to be trying to pull his limbs apart with [nendouryoku](#) .

"Thou-upstart-churl—!" Ujiteru's eyes flashed. He'd shatter the cur's skull from the inside!

Katsuhide's forehead fractured with a sound like a stone splitting apart. He moaned, hands against his bleeding head, and the pressure vanished from Ujiteru's ankle. Though he seemed to have failed in the attempt to break it apart completely.

(Did he block me...?!)

Psychokinesis was Katsuhide's specialty. He had, after all, severed the aerial life cable with nothing more than the power of his mind. If Ujiteru hadn't shielded himself immediately, that same power would certainly have sliced through his ankles as easily as through wet noodles.

"Damn...you...!" Katsuhide groaned, looking up out of eyes streaming with blood. Pulling on his injured foot, Ujiteru climbed up another dam. Katsuhide tried to catch him with his invisible hand again, but this time he could not seem to muster the power. He growled and immediately switched to <<nenpa >>—only to be deflected by an unseen curtain separating him from Ujiteru.

"Resign thyself, for thou art caged! Thou canst not harm us!"

"Damn you...damn you! Gyaah!" Katsuhide's curse ended on a scream as he somersaulted backwards. His <<hatchet-nenpa >>

had been reflected directly back at him. He tumbled down the slope as blood soaked through his gouged flank. The entire area had somehow been

turned into a special <<ground>> in which all attacks were reflected back on the attacker...!

"Thy struggles are in vain! Thou art left with no choice but suicide!"

"You can't win with these pathetic schemes, Houjou!" Katsuhide screamed frantically. "However well-planned your deceptions, we will not be caught in them!"

"What?"

"You can't fool us! Ujimasa's head will fall, for my brother is at [Lake Ashi](#) right now!"

"Wh-what didst thou...!"

"Too bad for you, [Houjou Ujiteru](#) ,
that I do not fight alone! I have an older brother, and he is one with
me in body and mind! You're the ones who struggle in vain! Ujimasa is
already dead by my brother's hand!"

"!"

"And I'll take all of you with me!"

A roar came from underground, directly beneath the dam on which Ujiteru stood.

"!"

The ground rumbled and bulged as Katsuhide poured his power into a mass of terrible energy beneath the surface.

"I'll blow you all to smithereens!"

Earth and sand erupted from the dam with a thunderous explosion of steam, accompanied by the intense reek of sulfur—the reservoir of hydrogen sulfide beneath the surface of [Oowaku Valley](#) had erupted!

"Gwaaaaah!"

The gush of burning, toxic sulfuric gas from the dormant volcano hit

Katsuhide squarely. The shock gouged into the slopes of [Kanmurigatake](#) , and the surrounding area collapsed with a roar and began to flow downhill.

"Waaaaaugh...!"

A mountain of sand engulfed Matsuda Katsuhide in the blink of an eye and crashed down [Oowaku Valley](#) 's slopes. The torrent of sulfuric gas and water vapor swallowed the

landslide, and everything rushed violently forward in a cloud of pure white that would not stop until it reached the bottom of the valley.

The hellish scene took Ujiteru's breath away as he and the other Houjou watched from the viewing platform. Ujiteru had been untouched by the avalanche of sand. From the moment the Fuumas' <<ground>> had reached him, Katsuhide, still under their spell, had been looking at another illusionary Ujiteru.

Ujiteru had climbed out of the valley as soon as they'd lured their foe where they wanted him. Everything from there had gone as planned, and Katsuhide had been engulfed by the landslide he himself had created. It had been something of an overkill, but at least they could be sure their enemy was dead.

"...Is't done?"

The valley continued to reverberate with the rumbling of the landslide, and the massive cloud of dust and vapor lingered, obscuring the area. When their field of vision finally cleared, they saw—

"!"

The vassals caught their breaths. In the midst of the water vapor was an unnatural swelling of sand and earth.

"What?!"

A deep eerie rumbling, as if the mountains themselves were groaning, rolled from the valley. The bulging sand slowly rose to the height of the aerial lift station. Then the mountain of sand and earth coalesced, gaining human shape, until it resolved into the form of a clay figurine.

"What in..."

Katsuhide's spirit, having lost its body of flesh and blood, had created for itself the form of a monster with a body of sand!

But Ujiteru held to his spot and faced it fearlessly. The monster's hand reached for Ujiteru and the others. A moment before it could grab them—

The water and sulfuric vapor around them roared a challenge, whirling with the speed and force of a tornado. An instant later, it became an enormous lion standing before Ujiteru. The guardian spirit-beast of the Houjou had taken its shape from the fiery breath of the volcano to face Katsuhide...!

The valley reverberated with the spirit-beast's roar.

Then it bared its teeth and leapt for the sand figurine's throat. An unearthly scream shook the valley.

The sand figurine crumbled, and the mountain of sand and earth collapsed back into the valley like a second landslide. Another cloud of vapor and dust billowed past and overflowed the ridge right to the foot of Mt. Souun:

a spectacular scene that surely rivaled the volcanic eruptions of the past, and stole all breath and speech from its onlookers.

Katsuhide's spirit, torn to pieces by the spirit-beast, was annihilated.

"'Tis done—..."

But not yet ended.

Ujiteru was moving even before the spirit-beast had finished the kill.

Ujimasa's head will fall, for my brother is at [Lake Ashi](#) right now!

([Aniue](#) !)

A chill edge lingered in the wind crossing the lake.

The house was only a short distance from the lake shore through the beech forest and down a narrow path. [Houjou Tsunashige](#) stood there listening to the sound of the waves striking the wharf.

—Or rather, Ujimasa, who had exchanged spirit vessels with Tsunashige.

It was his uncle who was acting as his decoy in Akiba's body and Ujimasa who had remained behind at the estate.

On a clear day he would be able to see [Komagatake](#) and [Kamiyama](#) from this spot. He could see them only in his mind's eye now, in this fog. Ujimasa quietly crossed his arms. —[Lake Ashi](#) was [Hakone Shrine](#) 's "font of purifying water" and a holy place in itself, but from the late [Muromachi Period](#) to the [Edo Period](#) , people had believed that 'Hell existed at the bottom of the lake.' That belief had led to the creation of the [Sai no Kawara](#) in Motohakone .

(Doth not the Pure Land exist even here at the lake's bottom where dwells a god...?)

No salvation have I found, Ujimasa thought, closing his eyes.

"And thou, neither wilt thou find salvation, Matsuda Takahide," he said to the man who had been following him all the while.

"..."

When had he noticed?

A single tall man wearing an army jacket appeared from the shadows of the trees as Ujimasa turned. He knew the true identity of this man.

"Assassination is no fit occupation for thee, for thy bloodlust tints the very air around thee."

"You knew I was here, then?"

This man was Matsuda Takahide, Katsuhide's older twin brother.

Ujimasa had known from the beginning, for these twin brothers never acted alone. Where Katsuhide was, there Takahide was as well. They had

defected to the Satomi together. He had guessed that this time would be no different, but had not told Ujiteru and the others. —Nor that though they might deceive Katsuhide by exchanging bodies, it would never fool Takahide.

Ujimasa showed Takahide the branch in his hand, taken from an evergreener shrub that bore red berries in the winter. It grew thickly in the [Hakone](#) forest and was of the same variety as that which had been left in the wooden box for him by Takahide.

"[Tsurushikimi](#) . The battle flag belonging to thee and thy brother. 'Tis said its fruit is poisonous."

"Sounds like our old master still remembers us."

"'Twas I who granted thee this battle flag."

They glared at each other.

Takahide had once belonged to the group of vassals directly under Ujimasa. The Mastuda Clan, which had served the Houjou for successive

generations since the time of [Souun](#) , had been treated with the same respect within the clan as the Houjou itself; [Matsuda Norihide](#) , head of the clan and a Houjou Family Elder, had led the [Odawara-shuu](#) and held a fief second in size only to [Genan](#) .

Brothers Takahide and Katsuhide had come from a collateral line, but were chosen by [Ujiyasu](#) to be a part of Ujimasa's personal unit because they were of an

age—something like a childhood school friendship. Takahide especially; he had become one of Ujimasa's most trusted vassals after his

coming-of-age ceremony and had remained by his side and assisted him with the affairs of governing the clan.

But the headstrong, belligerent Takahide had pressed his own causes too insistently and been unsuited for the position of assistant. He had all too often caused chaos within the clan and planted seeds of discontent between the vassals. Fearing the harmful influence of the increasingly-arrogant Takahide, Ujimasa had taken the pretext of restructuring the family vassals for the invasion of [Kazusa](#) to remove Takahide from the group of vassals directly attendant upon him and greatly reduced the size of his territory.

Enraged, Takahide had left the Houjou and turned to the Satomi shortly thereafter, taking his younger brother and followers with him.

But the Satomi Clan did not give him the welcome he expected; instead of heaping honors on his name, they had left him to quietly rot.

And then came the turning of the era. It was in [Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#)'s subjugation of [Odawara](#) that he saw his best opportunity for revenge upon the despised Ujimasa who had shunted him aside.

"'Twas thee who persuaded and aided [Matsuda Norihide](#) in his secret correspondence with Toyotomi, was't not?"

Takahide's eyes narrowed slightly. "That's absurd. Norihide was Norihide, after all. Whatever gibberish he might have spouted about fighting to the last, he flopped and begged for his life as soon as he knew that he was fighting a losing battle..."

Norihide, the foremost of the Houjou chief vassals. His secret messages to the Toyotomi side had been discovered by his eldest son Naohide , finally forcing him to escape the clan.

In actuality, it had been Takahide who had assisted those secret communications. Takahide, seeking an opportunity to ingratiate himself with Hideyoshi, had encouraged Norihide to betray the Houjou for the sake of their clan—but his plan had backfired. Hideyoshi, disgusted by Norihide's desertion, commanded him to commit ritual suicide, declaring furiously: 'What outrageous cowardice for a chief vassal to betray his clan!'

Learning of Takahide's deeds and fearing the reach of Hideyoshi's wrath, the Satomi had assassinated Takahide.

"And thus thou wouldst rather hate me than the Satomi?"

"That's right, Houjou Ujimasa ,"

Takahide growled softly, aura roiling with bloodlust. "Because all of it was your fault: you uprooted my future. You chased me away and threw me down and denied me the honor and glory that should have been mine as your trusted vassal. You doomed me to a life of mediocrity."

Ujimasa gazed at Takahide without any change at all in his expression.

"You were the reason, Ujimasa."

"What a foolish fellow thou art, to repay my kindness with resentment."

"You feared me, didn't you?"

Takahide approached, gaze fixed on Ujimasa.

"Oh yes. ...Because you're a coward. It took everything you had just to preserve all that your father left you—you could accomplish nothing requiring boldness or daring on your own. You had neither the spirit nor the caliber to be the supreme ruler of the Kantou Provinces. You were so afraid of your great father's shadow that you could not even find your own way."

Ujimasa was silent.

"That's right. I never accepted your rule. I always knew you were incapable of carrying the Houjou Clan! Hadn't I watched you since we were children together? I saw through you; I knew you didn't have what it took to be head of the clan...! That's why I revolted against you! And the Houjou was destroyed at your hands, just as I predicted! You're the one who caused the ruination of our country, Ujimasa!"

"Is that all thou desirest to say, Takahide?" Ujimasa returned in a low, steady voice. "Such words from a fool who mistakes aggression for the only path of a leader, who knows not the value of governance, import no more meaning than the barking of a mongrel dog to me."

The arrogant Takahide stiffened at Ujimasa's haughty tone. Ujimasa glared fiercely at Takahide, no trace of fear in his bearing.

"Who art thou to carry such hatred and bitterness when thou hast never looked back at thine own folly? Worth is not a thing given thee at

birth: 'tis built up by thee over thy whole lifetime. Thou endeavored nothing...! Thou hast not the right to speak to me of hatred!"

"!"

The intensity and force of Ujimasa's presence left Takahide gasping for breath, but Ujimasa continued mercilessly, his anger manifesting itself as a surge of ferocious <<energy>> from his entire body:

"Thou canst neither run nor hide! Therefore come! Show me thy worth! Come, if thou art capable of causing me even a single injury!"

"Damn you...!" Enraged, Takahide finally exploded with the power of his hatred. "If you want to die so much, I'll grant your wish!" he snarled, teeth bared. He blasted <<nenpa >> like bullets at Ujimasa, who blocked them with a <<goshinha >> as he stood poised, gathering energy to himself.

He flung out his arm. "Canst thou do no better?!"

"!"

An unseen hand thrust Takahide violently back and slapped him hard against the shrubs behind him. Takahide barely managed a <<goshinha >>

against the repeated blows. Ujimasa's will smashed the surrounding trees one by one and rained branches like knives down on him. An intense fire swallowed them before they could pierce Takahide's neck.

"Oooooooooo!"

The roar, wrung out of the pit of Takahide's stomach, reignited his will. The ground bulged beneath Ujimasa's feet, then collapsed inward.

"!"

As Ujimasa leapt aside, the roots of the trees around him shot like living creature toward his landing spot. Just before they closed around his feet—

"...Thou cur!"

The trees caught fire and instantly crumbled to ash a hair's breadth before their roots touched Ujimasa. Ujimasa leapt again as Takahide pressed the attack. Plasmatic bolts tore repeatedly through the air; neither retreated. Ujimasa flung out his arm again.

"Eat this!"

"What?!"

Fine gold sand like dust from a moth's wing enveloped Takahide in incandescent heat.

"Waaaugh!"

Takahide covered his face against the scorching pain, but his attacks did not cease. With an ugly high-pitched *skreen* and *crack*, Ujimasa's shoulder split open, and blood gushed from the wound.

"!"

He fell to one knee with a moan. Hot fresh blood smeared his cheek. He

could see the broken bone beneath the spurting blood. Takahide looked up in agony, the skin scalding and souging away from half his face. But he was no novice at dealing with pain. He managed to stand without losing consciousness. —Ujimasa had not yet made it to his feet.

"Not yet...not just yet. Get up, Ujimasa."

Ujimasa gritted his teeth and glared up at Takahide with blood dripping from his face.

"Looks like you won't concede that little lordling conceit of yours until I've thoroughly rubbed it in the dirt. That vassal cleanup of yours or whatever you called it, when you oppressed me and beat me down in front of everyone like a bad example—you could never know the humiliation I was forced to bear. ...Now stand! This isn't anything close to the humiliation your brother received!"

"!"

Ujimasa's spine jerked in surprise. Mockery joined the agony warping Takahide's face.

"What...I would know thy meaning."

"Humph. So you don't know anything," Takahide barked a laugh, lips twisting oddly. "What a worthless brother! Such courage your youngest brother had. Or maybe he was just so ashamed that he simply couldn't say anything!"

"Thou churl...!" Ujimasa's impassive expression wavered for the first time. "What dost thou mean by it? What didst thou do to Saburou?!"

"He screamed so beautifully," Takahide reminisced, looking at Ujimasa.

"Oh, how we made him scream. All of us tasted the chrysanthemum's core

to our hearts' content. Your brother had not yet even known a woman then, I deem."

(He cannot mean...)

The blood drained out of Ujisama's face. Takahide's twisted smile widened.

"Oh yes, your virgin brother with his pure, fresh scent. You wouldn't know his delicious sensitivity, how delightfully pitiable his body in its pain, how quickly impatient and slick when our suckling mouths touched him just *there*.

Ah, how he cried out and flopped like a fish! He took in our flesh so deeply, unwilling though he was, and how everyone laughed at his tightness, grasping so hard that it made pulling out difficult. No woman could have compared to that sweetness!"

Ujimasa, frozen in place, could not immediately comprehend the words entering his ears. He had forgotten even to close his mouth.

"Thou canst not...mean..."

Takahide gave an ugly, triumphant laugh.

"The Houjou are really something! A little slut—that's what he was! I

was planning to take revenge on you by raping him, but in the end I was the one beguiled!"

"...Be silent..."

"Some of my fellows couldn't forget their taste of him and fell so madly in love that they died castrating themselves in their insanity. Your youngest brother is a demon! What a family you are, Houjou!"

"...Hold thy tongue, I say!"

"It's all because of you, Ujimasa!" Takahide yelled, voice hoarse and wild. "If you want someone to hate, hate yourself...! This is your punishment from Heaven! You're paying for your sins! Tremble with shame at Saburou-dono's pain and repent!"

Ujimasa had launched himself at Takahide even before he had finished speaking. He punched Takahide with enough force to snap his neck. Takahide fell to the ground, and Ujimasa leaned over him, face frozen in a demonic mask.

"Graaaaaaaah!"

Ujimasa's hands fastened with all his strength around Takahide's neck.

"I'll kill thee! I will kill thee, Matsuda!" Ujimasa cried wildly. "I will crush thee to death with mine own two hands!"

Takahide grasped Ujimasa's wrists with all his remaining strength.

"!"

Ujimasa's eyes widened. Though in agony, Takahide's desperate grip was not attempting to tear off Ujimasa's hands. Takahide's bloody lips opened slightly.

"That's...right...Ujimasa. Saburou-dono was...the eighth star...the star of misfortune...!"

"Star of misfortune..."

Takahide laughed fearlessly out of a twisted face. "The seven brothers of the Houjou...were born to be the Big Dipper, the constellation of warriors! The death of your elder brother...was the evil omen that sealed your fate!"

Ujimasa's eyes widened. "...Mine...elder brother..."

"Ay. Shinkurou-dono was to be the eldest of you brothers. ...If

Shinkurou-dono had lived and taken up his duty as heir, the Houjou would never have been destroyed. The Houjou would even mayhap have become the supreme rulers of the [Kantou](#) Provinces! It was because you, the second son, became heir instead that the Houjou Clan was so tragically annihilated...!"

"!"

Looking up in close proximity at Ujimasa's stiffening face, Takahide continued loudly, "Yes! The Big Dipper summoned destruction on the Houjou because your original star vanished and the star of misfortune

shined on you! Your stars were all out of alignment! The warriors' constellation threw down the Houjou!"

"Be sileeeeeent!" The howl erupted from the pit of Ujimasa's stomach. As if he were trying to tear apart Takahide's exalting cry.

A razor-sharp mind-spear thrust straight through Ujimasa's body. He somersaulted backwards, fresh blood gushing from his wounds. Takahide instantly rose and drove forward with the finishing blow...!

"Now die, cursed Ujimasa!"

However—

Takahide froze in place.

Blood spouted out of his forehead and drew a red trail down his face.

A metallic *thunk* echoed through the forest by the lake.

Blood misted in the air and splattered onto the pebbles on the shore.

Takahide dropped straight to the ground, skull split apart by a bullet fired from directly behind him.

The tall shadow of a man separated itself from the shadow of a beech tree and stood expressionlessly with pistol at the ready—

It was [Fuuma Kotarou](#) .

"..."

Ujimasa stood slowly, blood dripping from his body. More blood soaked

the ground around the convulsing body of the man who had been shot in the head.

<<...Why...>>

"The head of the Houjou Clan meets none alone," Ujimasa answered Takahide's question, the mask of the impassive, dignified lord in place once more. "I had thought to personally deliver thy death, but... Thou hast not so much worth in thee."

He pronounced, eyes cold, "...Go to Hell."

A spirit-lion, golden and glittering, appeared behind Kotarou: a spirit-beast of particularly high rank, created to protect the head of the Houjou Clan.

Not waiting for Takahide to breathe his last, Ujimasa turned on his heels and reentered the forest in the direction of the house unaided. As Kotarou bowed deeply to Ujimasa, the spirit-beast sank its teeth into the assassin's spirit.

Waves formed on the lake as if resonating with the voiceless scream.

Matsuda Takahide's spirit had been destroyed.

He heard Ujiteru's voice from the depths of the forest.

Ujiteru had just rushed back from [Oowaku Valley](#) , filled with concern about his brother. He cried out at Ujimasa's blood-covered appearance.

"Aniueeeeeee—!"

Ujiteru ran toward him, dignity tossed to the winds. Ujimasa lost the willpower to keep his body upright the moment he saw his brother. Ujiteru barely managed to reach Ujimasa in time to catch his slumping body.

Ujimasa's consciousness receded.

The only thing he heard was Ujiteru calling to him over and over again.

Ultramarine Chapter 8: Ultramarine

He

hadn't understood, then. But it had been one of those scenes that sometimes just tucked itself away in the back of a person's mind.

Yes—Ujimasa, too, remembered that morning, a morning as thickly enshrouded in fog as this one.

It had been his habit to rise early, but that morning had felt somehow different. He had walked out into the garden in the gray of early dawn, in the space after the night's end but before brightness of sunrise, and spotted Saburou there. What was he doing out in the garden so early? he had wondered, thinking it odd. No, Saburou seemed to have just returned from somewhere.

He stood there as motionlessly as a statue, exhaustion on his face, glossy black hair streaked, matted, and wild, clothes in appalling disarray, back caked with...sand from the beach? His face was pale, his mouth bruised a dark crimson as if he had been hit there. The eyes he lifted to Ujimasa, already red and swollen, were filled with tears.

What is wrong? Even Ujimasa forgot himself at Saburou's alarming state. *What hath happened, Saburou...?!*

The keen glitter of his eyes, that sparkle completely unique to him, had been extinguished; now they were as dull and glassy as those of a dead fish. He shook his head, brows creased against some inner pain.

Nothing... He stared at the ground. *'Tis nothing, Aniue .*

He forced the words out of a startlingly hoarse voice, sounding as if he had been screaming for hours on end. Ujimasa's concerned gaze noted the bruises like spots of congested blood trailing from the nape of his neck to his chest.

Saburou slipped past him and limped his way out of sight behind the house.

Saburou...

He heard the sound of water being drawn from the well a moment later. ...Water for a bath, he guessed.

That morning, Ujimasa had not the slightest idea what could have happened.

But thinking back on it now—yes, it had been a few days later that he had heard the news that several of their vassals, Matsuda Takahide and Matsuda Katsuhide among them, had left Sagami and the Houjou.

And Saburou's life had come apart. He had indulged in heavy drinking and lost himself in the boisterous pursuit of pleasure, sometimes wrecking destruction around the estate in blind fits of rage. "He hath lost himself in despair," the vassals said, though they knew not the reason. There were times when he abruptly shut himself alone in his room to brood, allowing no one to approach.

Their father [Ujiyasu](#) had called Saburou to him and given him a stern rebuke.

Their youngest brother's startling transformation had startled and worried Ujiteru and the others terribly.

But it seemed that Saburou had told no one the real reason.

Instead, he had sealed the memory of the disaster that had befallen his body within his own chest and borne it alone.

He now knew everything.

Alone in the room, Ujimasa leaned against the window and looked out for a long time across [Lake Ashi](#) , absorbed in thought.

He lifted his hand to the cold glass and closed his eyes.

His youngest brother's face remained behind his closed eyelids.

(The star of misfortune...?)

The mist over the peak of [Hakone](#) lifted at last, all unnoticed by Ujimasa.

The lake surface caught the light of the sun from the clear expanse of the sky and glittered with blue fire.

Most of the cherry blossoms at [Odawara Castle](#) had scattered with the rain a few days ago, leaving only fresh green

leaves behind. They were one of the city's famed attractions, and large crowd gathered at the castle during sakura-viewing season. This year had been no exception.

Most of the [Somei Yoshino](#) blossoms had drifted towards the mountain, while in the Gaura area of [Hakone](#) the cherry trees were still in full bloom. [Hakone](#) 's mountain sakura, though less showy, glowed with their own quiet beauty.

He had taken the [Ropeway](#) to the station at the summit of [Komagatake](#) . Perhaps because of the late hour, there were few fellow passengers to disembark with him as [Tsunashige](#) alighted from the lift cabin. He was meeting Ujiteru at the viewing platform at [Komagatake](#) .

"Uncle," a young man called to him, waving. "How goes thy recovery?" He was sitting on the curb at the viewing platform.

Tsunashige was wearing a corset-like garment for his injured shoulder.

"Mm. The doctor saith it heals well, but I should not aggravate the wound with undue movement."

The news relieved Ujiteru. Tsunashige's spirit vessel had been heavily wounded in the battle between Ujimasa and Takahide. The possessor, of course, shared all the pain of the possessed's body. Ujimasa, deeply apologetic, had insisted on staying in that body until it healed, but Tsunashige had refused, claiming with a chuckle that he felt

uncomfortable in a body not of his choosing. They had switched back not long afterwards. There were things that Ujimasa needed to do in Akiba's body.

"Painful though the wounds may be, they hinder me but little. I could not see the cherry blossoms at [Odawara Castle](#) , but...at least I may leave the hospital without trouble."

"Uncle..."

"How doth Ujimasa?"

Ujiteru sighed deeply. "Busy, as ever. He could spare no time even to see the flowers. If he continues thus, he will work himself into the grave before ever an assassin can reach him," Ujiteru joked, chuckling, and looked up at the clear sky. ...The wind, though chill, carried the bracing freshness particular to mountain breezes.

Ujimasa had changed after that day. As if his very core had grown stronger, his iron will tempered to further keenness. What exchange had taken place between him and Matsuda Tatahide, Kotarou had not divulged,

so though Ujiteru knew it had been an impetus for this change, he remained ignorant of his brother's inner thoughts.

"Ah, how fair is [Lake Ashi](#) ," Tsunashige exclaimed with pleasure. The view as one might expect from the natural platform at [Komagatake](#) 's summit, was sublime. They could see [Lake Ashi](#) lying directly below them like a miniature garden. The sapphire expanse

of the sea glittering beyond the mountains, and the city of [Odawara](#)

continued on its opposite side in one unbroken sweep.

"Shall we walk a little?"

They took the promenade at the summit towards [Mototsumiya](#) . Before the small plaza to the left of the shrine was [Kamiyama](#) , the worshipped dwelling of a god, and behind it the graceful, snow-capped peak of the sacred [Mt. Fuji](#) .

They stood together in the plaza, speechless, as always, before that breath-taking view. How unutterably holy the wondrous grandeur of the sight of those sacred mountains side by side, Ujiteru thought.

The summit was quiet.

There was no sound but the wind.

"—I feel my feelings cleansed here..." Tsunashige said, gazing at the faraway [Mt. Fuji](#) from the deserted plaza. "I think I know when I look on this sight for

what reason our ancestors named this a sacred place inhabited by the gods. Even we, who are accustomed to so neglect the existence of the gods, feel here the presence of that which...surpasses human beings..."

—"Ay..." Ujiteru responded briefly, nodding. Tsunashige turned as the silence stretched.

"What weighs thy mind, Ujiteru?"

"Nothing..."

Ujiteru shook his head lightly and looked up. Ujiteru rather than

Ujimasa had been brooding and despondent since the incident with the assassins. Tsunashige had heard of it from [Ujikuni](#) , and it was he who had invited Ujiteru here.

Expression growing slightly more serious, Tsunashige asked, "Doth it concern Ujimasa...?"

"I have been thinking..." Ujiteru murmured, his eyes fixed on the ground, "I am only a simple fool who knows naught but fighting—what, then, can I do for my brother? How can I act for the good of all? I can find no answers and make foolish blunder after foolish blunder, and always must I reproach myself for't in the end."

"Mayhap they were not blunders?"

"I know not..." Ujiteru looked at Tsunashige with a smile. "My brother, unlike myself, is exceedingly complex... Cold he is betimes because he hath too much kindness for a general of the [Sengoku](#) , and acts contrary to his disposition thereupon. ...But in truth he is awkward and hath no skillful words to express his thoughts."

"..."

"Such a brother do I love with all my heart."

"Ujiteru..."

"As much do I love Saburou. He is my youngest brother, and he is most dear to me. If they were to become enemies, I...know not how I could abandon either for the sake of the other."

Ujiteru fell silent, eyes very serious indeed. Did he have a premonition of such a future? Had he been brooding upon it for all this time? ...The words had sounded as if he were speaking to himself.

"I...Uncle," Ujiteru said after a pause, "I long for the day when Ujikuni and Ujinori ...when

all of us may gather in one place. I dream of seeing all my brothers smiling together." Ujiteru finished with a self-mocking smile and turned to Tsunashige. "Am I...a great fool after all?"

"No..." Tsunashige quietly turned his head. "No, not so, Ujiteru. That is perhaps..." his gaze slowly trailed back to the peak of Mt. Fuji — "your father's wish as well..."

"Uncle..."

Tsunashige looked at Ujiteru with all the gentleness of the absent

Ujiyasu. "And mine," Tsunashige smiled. "Once healed, I must away to Kawagoe . I will not return to Odawara for the while, so I leave Ujimasa in thy care."

His uncle's kindness warmed Ujiteru.

"Ay!" Ujiteru replied with the eager gladness of a little boy. Nodding his satisfaction, Tsunashige slowly retraced his steps down the path.

That would be the last conversation Ujiteru and Tsunashige were to have in this world.

For Tsunashige would close the chapter of his history as Houjou Tsunashige in a battle of onshou at Kawagoe .

Odawara 's sea spread out before him.

The Sagami Sea .

Standing alone, Ujiteru looked upon it for a long, long time.

The sea his brother, gone to that distant northern land, had loved and missed so dearly.

This is our homeland...

The bounty of the Houjou...

His father's words from those long centuries ago echoed in his mind as
Ujiteru gazed fixedly at that distant ocean, arms around himself.

Would the day truly come when they would leave?

Leave this sea, these mountains?

Even if those who loved them disappeared—

(Our feelings will not die...)

They would not fade away with his death, for he would still love this
sea, these mountains; that love would live on in the hearts of those

who came after him.

In the souls of those who embraced the ultramarine of that beloved sea.

They would live on.

Live...forever.

So Ujiteru believed.

Like a vow to himself, Ujiteru silently called the names of those he loved before finally lifting his head and looking at the [Sagami Sea](#) once more.

And gathering that beloved hue into the sanctuary of his heart...he walked away.

The clear, cold mountain breeze carried its breath of divinity down to the sea in a ceaseless stream.

It would be
three more years before
Saburou Kagetora saw his brothers Ujimasa and Ujiteru again.

END

July-born Sirius

"What do you think about going out for dinner tonight?" Naoe said in the car on their way back to the hotel.

"Dinner?"

"In celebration of the completion of your first big mission. We can certainly eat at the hotel as well, but since we went through so much trouble, why don't we find a good restaurant? What would you like?—Japanese, Chinese, or—...?"

"I guess," Takaya replied half-heartedly, looking at the streetlights streaming past along the highway.

The first big mission Takaya had been a part of.

The case of the curse on [Sendai](#), involving Mogami and Ashina, had finally been resolved after being

transferred to the Tokyo stage for a week or so. The loose ends were now tied up, and they had left the rest to the <<[Nokizaru](#)>>.

They were heading straight back to their lodgings. Speaking of which, they hadn't had a real meal yet today. That morning they'd handed over the watch to a detective and had a sandwich in the car. So he was certainly hungry, but didn't have a craving for anything in particular.

"Anything edible would be fine."

"You look rather tired."

"Not really. I'm not tired—we've just been on constant guard."

"You're out of steam, in other words?"

Takaya sighed as his head slowly dropped back against the passenger seat.

"I'm exhausted."

"Not without reason. In that case, will you leave dinner tonight to me?"

"Yeah, okay," he agreed, but immediately started having second thoughts when he saw Naoe's smile.

Naoe had probably remembered Takaya grumbling about having a hard time

with Tokyo. And he had an unexpectedly malicious side, so—

(He's not gonna take me to some really pretentious place in [Azabu](#) or [Roppongi](#), is he?)

He looked like a guy who'd know the area known as the [Minato Ward](#) pretty well. Takaya was slightly worried, but shrugged inwardly and decided to take whatever came along.

After resting for a bit at the hotel, they headed for the restaurant by taxi.

Naoe had apparently somehow already managed to make arrangements in the

hour or so that Takaya had been napping. Takaya was impressed, but in actuality Naoe was an old hand with dealing with 'arrangements' such as these. This was where experience came in.

They got into the taxi, where Naoe gave detailed instructions to the driver. He sounded so familiar with Tokyo that it rather irritated

Takaya. Well, it wasn't just Tokyo.

(Actually, he comes off as being pretty worldly.)

He'd heard that Naoe was twenty-eight. Maybe everyone was like that when they got to that age, Takaya mused, but it was slightly inappropriate to label Naoe as 'average'. He was rather too worldly for his age.

It'd already been three months since he'd met Naoe (or would 'met again' be more accurate?). Takaya had come to know something of his 'character' this past week, and especially in the forty-six hours they'd worked on the mission together.

Though he'd heard that Naoe's family lived in [Utsunomiya](#), Naoe was extremely familiar with the geography of the capital. He'd driven them around everywhere in a rental car without need for a map or GPS. Naoe came to the city relatively frequently as an assistant to his older brother, who was a realtor, but that likely wasn't all he came here for.

(Sounds like he goes to Minato on other business, too.)

Takaya seemed strangely fixated on Minato.

But surprisingly, the taxi headed in the exact opposite direction from the [Imperial Palace](#). They were traveling east on Yasukuni Avenue and passed places like Kudan and Jinbou-chou, but he had no idea where they were going. After around ten minutes, the

car turned from the main avenue unto a narrowish street. They stopped

in front of a small intersection and got off to walk the rest of the way.

"It'll take less than two minutes. It's very close."

The place Naoe had chosen was a small Japanese restaurant in Kanda .

It was a cozy little two-storied wooden structure with a shop sign which proclaimed 'inexpensive Japanese cuisine'. It stood shoulder to shoulder with other shops with similarly unassuming storefronts. The storefronts provided the only illumination; streetlights were few and far in-between in this dimly-lit neighborhood, and traffic was light. Several pots of blooming morning glories were placed here and there.

"It's a small place, but I can vouch for the food. I think you will like it as well," Naoe said, and pushed the sliding door open. His broad shoulders brushed by the store sign as he passed. A cheerful 'welcome!' greeted them from inside. The brightness of the florescent lights blinded him for a moment, but as his eyes adjusted, he saw a short middle-aged woman wearing a white apron over traditional Japanese clothes waiting for them.

"Aah, it's been a while. Thank you for visiting, Tachibana-san."

This appeared to be the proprietress, who greeted Naoe with familiarity. Guests were coming steadily into the restaurant. The proprietress showed them into a room on the second floor with an unaffected smile.

The stairs creaked beneath their feet. The room prepared for them was a cozy Japanese-style room about six tatami s

in width, whose pillars and beams looked to have some years on them. It was easily forty years old. The air conditioner was old-fashioned, and judging from the cracks in the windows' wooden frames, the place would be cold during winter. In the alcove of the room was a pure black God of Fortune.

"Will you have something to drink?" the proprietress asked.

Naoe replied, "We don't need alcohol tonight." Asked if he was driving, Naoe only smiled.

"Why aren't you drinking anything? You might as well," Takaya said after the proprietress left.

"A vassal cannot drink alone in front of his lord."

"You didn't want some beer, at least? And it was hot today, too.

Besides, the cup after work is special. I'll drink with you if you're gonna have some."

"You can't, Takaya-san."

"Why not? I can drink beer."

"You're not of age."

"Geez, this again? Give it up. I really hate it when you do the whole adult talking down to a kid thing."

"You're putting me on the spot."

Ah, but this was a form of solicitousness from Takaya. And besides, though Takaya acted like he wanted it in front of Naoe, he didn't particularly like alcohol—it was obvious in the way he drank. This rebellion against not being given a drink seemed more of an obsession over being treated like a child.

Naoe asked for a bottle of beer and an extra glass. Orange juice came for Takaya, but Naoe poured Takaya a third from his bottle and the rest for himself.

"Good work."

"Yeah!"

They lightly clinked glasses. Naoe watched Takaya drain his glass and drank as well. The chilled beer was wonderful.

"Delicious, isn't it."

Takaya laughed, seeing right through him.

Their food was carried in.

They could sometimes hear the laughter of the customers from downstairs, but it was never too noisy. Rather, Takaya thought the bustling atmosphere of the restaurant lent it a genial mood. The cozy room was perfect for two, and its somewhat old-fashioned appearance gave it a comfortable feeling.

"This was a bit unexpected."

Naoe's chopsticks paused at Takaya's murmured comment.

"Do you not like the food?"

"Ah, no, it's not that. It just that I didn't think you'd bring me to a place like this."

Naoe smiled, somewhat relieved. "French or Italian cuisine is wonderful as well, but eating at such a place would be a bit tiring, wouldn't it?"

I thought that dinner while sitting on [tatami](#) mats would be more calming. Since we are Japanese," he chuckled. Though

he didn't look like a man for whom a high-class French restaurant would be taxing.

(Aah...)

You look rather tired.

(Was he maybe looking out for me?)

"There are quite a few shops like this in the neighborhood. I know of several other small restaurants as well, and despite their size, all of them have very skilled cooks. They use good-quality ingredients and serve wonderful sake, and though they're not famous, their food is just as delicious."

"How do you know all this?"

"When my eldest brother comes to Tokyo on business, he often takes me

around to his favorite restaurants. This is actually one of them as well. I've been here several times."

"Huh..."

"Did you think that all restaurants in Tokyo were pretentious places with inflated prices?"

So he'd been totally transparent. Takaya's lips tightened with embarrassment.

"Well, you can't take a guy with you to one of those *elite* high-class French restaurants anyway, can you?"

"Indeed? Then why don't we eat at an *elite* five-star French restaurant tomorrow?"

"I'm heading back to [Matsumoto](#) tomorrow!"

Naoe laughed. But there was a trace of disappointment in it.

"Though in all seriousness, I honestly did not think that things would proceed so smoothly here. It's all thanks to you regaining your <<power>>. Handling this one on my own would have been quite difficult."

"I didn't do—all that much."

"You did. It's all thanks to you, Takaya-san."

"You don't...you don't have to thank me, since I didn't do anything," he said, and fell silent at some dark thought.

It was true that his <<power>>—yes. He could use it now.

But the capture of those who had infiltrated the Diet Assembly had all been a result of Naoe's plan; all he'd done was perform <<choubuku >> on a few people.

"No, it was only with your help that we accomplished this mission,"

Naoe repeated politely. "You were not one bit inferior to your old self in either decisiveness or judgment. I truly felt that you were you.

Though that is a strange way of putting it."

Takaya's chopsticks paused. His eyes darkened.

"I didn't do anything..."

"Takaya-san."

"It didn't go smoothly at all. If I'd regained my powers sooner—"

Takaya set down his chopsticks without saying anything more, his lips pressed tight.

Looking at his silent form, Naoe thought, (Aaah—...)

—He had been worried about this.

Takaya had been fine when they'd been running around with all their thoughts focused on the mission, but now that everything was dealt with and the tension gone—

"Are you speaking of Kokuryou Shizuko?"

That heavy stone Takaya bore in his chest was the death of Kokuryou's

wife, an innocent casualty in this mission. Naoe knew that Takaya could not help but brood over it now that everything was resolved.

"I understand your feelings completely. But you must not blame yourself. Do you remember what Kokuryou-san said to you?"

"But I—..."

Takaya muttered something, but even the act of speaking was painful, and he swallowed the thought back down. He propped his elbows up on the

low table and leaned his forehead against his clasped hands.

"I can't help but be ashamed of myself."

"You were not yet able to use your powers. It was not your fault. You could not have prevented it."

"If I had regained my powers sooner. If I'd tackled it with more seriousness. No, if they hadn't been involved in the first place...!"

"Takaya-san," Naoe said forcefully, and Takaya stopped.

"You may say so now, with the clarity of hindsight, but it was unavoidable. You had completely sealed your memories and <<power>>. Perhaps you would not have been able to break through the seal created by your past self no matter how earnestly you trained. If you look at it another way, you may not have been able to open that door at all without the shock of Shizuko-san's death."

"In other words, you're saying that she was the sacrifice needed for me to

regain my <<power>>!"

"Not so. You must not think about it that way."

Even so, if the responsibility lay not with Takaya, then the one who bore it would probably be—

(Would probably be—)

"..."

Naoe said nothing.

Takaya had never accepted that his personality belonged to 'Uesugi Kagetora'. He didn't know if he would ever be able to accept it. He was only 'Ougi Takaya'.

The moment he accepted that he was Kagetora would probably be the moment he truly shouldered his sins; his suffering form came easily to Naoe's mind.

(And the one to force him into it would be a sinner as well.)

Naoe clenched his teeth in silent anguish as he looked at Takaya.

(—It's not your fault.)

If Takaya could not escape its burden even so, then Naoe would shoulder it with him. He would take his share. —He was prepared for that.

To share the pain...

Taking in a slight breath, Naoe began again, "Takaya-san. I believe

that Shizuko-san's spirit has been watching you since her death."

"..."

"I'm sure she must have seen how driven you were by her death. She is such a person."

"... Naoe."

"I think you have been acting in all sincerity. I do not know if I could have done as much were I in your place. I know very well that you have given your all. I understand, and I think that Shizuko-san must as well. Even if I were to tell you not to blame yourself, I know that it would be hard for someone like you. But you have been equally hurt."

Unable to bear Naoe's words, Takaya's eyes fell. But Naoe's painfully gentle voice reached to his heart.

"Will you not entrust those feelings of self-condemnation to me, and at least allow yourself to heal for the time being?"

"..."

"Takaya-san."

Takaya exhaled deeply. He shook his head, brows drawn, but his small smile said that he was okay.

"—Sorry. I didn't really want you to see that."

"...It's okay for you to show me more."

"What're you talking about?"

"This is much better than for you to suffer alone in a place where no one can see."

"Are you my doctor or something?"

Takaya smiled, but it still seemed difficult for him to unbottle his feelings. It would be healthier if he could say what he wanted, but that was simply not possible for Takaya.

Perhaps even Takaya himself didn't know how insecure he really was. Not leaving him to his own devices for now was probably a good idea—

"Takaya-san, if your plans permit, I would like to stay with you tomorrow as well—"

"Eh...?" Takaya asked, surprised.

"Is it not possible?"

"What are you suddenly—..."

"I would like for us to get to know each other better. Well, that feels a bit belated, but... I can take you home by car. It's summer vacation, so there won't be a problem, yes?"

"There's...no problem, I guess."

"I've wanted a vacation as well. We can take our time and perhaps stop somewhere for the night. [Tateshina](#) would be wonderful, don't you think? There are many places to see along the [Central Highway](#) . I'll deliver you safely to [Matsumoto](#) , so—"

"What, we're gonna spend more time together? I'm tired of looking at your face already."

"I am not at all tired of seeing yours."

"!"

"Shall we dine at [Azabu](#) 's French restaurant tomorrow?"

"Da...damn you!"

The sliding door opened with a courteous 'Excuse me', and the next course was brought in. Takaya hurriedly corrected his posture, but Naoe only smiled. A black lacquer bowl was placed in front of Takaya.

"Pike conger soup."

Takaya gave Naoe a rather baleful glare.

It was already near nine when they left the restaurant.

Though Takaya's slight depression hadn't left him with much of an appetite, he was still a growing boy, and hadn't left anything on his plate. It'd been the first time in his life that he'd had 'pike conger' and had thought it rather interesting, so he was quite happy when Naoe said that they would have 'saltwater eel' in [Osaka](#) next time. He left on a full stomach, and looked a bit sleepy.

"Shall we take a walk to work off some of that food?" Naoe suggested.

It was surprisingly cool outside with the breeze. Takaya set off ahead, luxuriating in the night wind.

There was something nostalgic about the rows of houses. Though Takaya had never been in the lower parts of Tokyo before, the overflowing sense of life here was delightful. The sounds of night games in halftime drifting through open windows, children's bicycles leaning against entrances decorated by flowerpots—the liveliness of this neighborhood lent it a gentle atmosphere.

"Maybe I'm a bit prejudiced."

"?—About what?"

Takaya turned and looked—looked anew—at Naoe. But the corners of his mouth only turned up in a slight smile, and he didn't clarify.

"—I've always liked going out at night. Not for the nightlife and stuff like that—just to roam. I'd tell myself it was to go buy cigarettes or something. But it wasn't really to do anything, just to walk around. I don't mind walking, so I'd just wander. I liked roads at night when there was nobody around, or the path along the [Metoba River](#) .

"..."

"Well, one big reason was that in the old days my old man would be ranting and raving at home, so I couldn't stay there," he added with downcast eyes, smiling awkwardly. Naoe gazed steadily at his profile. Though Takaya stuttered his words, Naoe liked to listen to him talk.

"A town at night is great, don't you think? Doesn't it just tickle your nose?"

"My nose?"

"Yeah. There's the scent of sweet olives in the fall and leaves in the summer, and you know when it's going to rain by the smell. You can't really tell in the daytime—it's interesting."

Perhaps a bit affected by the alcohol, Takaya tilted his faintly flushed face happily and sniffed the air.

"When I took walks by myself, I'd go up next to houses and suddenly smell things like soap or shampoo from the bathroom. And then I'd see a warm light like this coming from the window. It would make me feel a little happy, even though I was on the dim road by myself... Have you ever felt like that?"

"Takaya-san."

"Augh...anyway, what am I talking about?"

Looking down at the ground in embarrassment, Takaya scratched his nose and set off in front again.

The night wind filled Takaya's shirt. His washed-out jeans suited him perfectly. The way he combed back the bangs of his wind-blown black hair felt infinitely familiar.

(Once again we can be together for only a handful of days.)

How mysterious, he thought. Even when he had first met 'Ougi Takaya,'

he'd been able to accept that this was 'Kagetora's' current form with no sense of discomfort. Normally, they needed at least some time to become used to each other's new form after taking over a body, but—

(Is it because of the way he looks?)

Not that it was anything like his previous host body.

(I wonder why?)

Takaya looked up at the night sky, enjoying the cool wind.

"Ah..." he suddenly murmured as if at some memory.

"What is it?"

"No, it's just that just now—... I sometimes have this feeling..."

"Sometimes? From before?"

"Yeah. It's not very clear at all, but the wind's scent reminded me of something. Except I can't really put my finger on it. Just when I start to think that I know this, or to feel nostalgic, something—"

Naoe looked quizzically at Takaya, not quite grasping the gist of his thoughts. Takaya stared back at him with rounded eyes.

"Is it you?"

"Eh?"

"Ah...nothing," Takaya temporized, then looked up at Naoe again. "Well, I mean. Maybe I've walked with you in the wind like this some summer

before?"

Naoe stared back blankly. Takaya hesitantly explained: It wasn't déjà vu, but an odd sensation he'd felt many times in the past: that he had walked in this wind with someone before— Though he couldn't remember who it had been. But walking with Naoe now, it was as if a puzzle piece had fallen into place.

Naoe smiled as he listened.

"That's quite true. I have walked with you like this many times in the past."

"Then that was..."

Someone's face, faint as if seen through fog, had always been with him when he'd felt that bewildering, nameless nostalgia. It hadn't been Yuzuru—he'd known it before he had met Yuzuru. It had reminded him a bit of his father, so he'd thought that maybe it'd been a memory from his childhood, but—

(But it wasn't...)

"Of the five senses, the sense of smell is the one on which memory is most easily imprinted," Naoe said as if in answer to his inner riddle.

"It always seems to be the one that most readily calls up memories. Even something that you've clean forgotten—somehow some scent will unexpectedly revive that memory. Sometimes you'll remember the scent of something even if you've forgotten the thing itself. You're reminded by

the fragrance. Such things seem to happen quite often. You may have lost your memory, but perhaps your memories of those scents are the only things that remain."

Takaya listened, slightly stunned.

But before long he sank into a sullen silence. —This was starting to sound like something you'd find in those silly love dramas, like a 'lover from a past life' or 'soul mate'.

(This is way embarrassing...)

He scowled, unwilling to accept it.

Naoe looked at Takaya's rapidly receding figure in amazement, smiling wryly.

A difficult person, as always.

After walking for a little while, they came to a small park at the foot of a hill. Takaya headed for the water fountain, saying that he wanted to wash his face.

Takaya twisted the water fountain handle all the way and washed his face purposelessly with what little water came out of the sprout, then rinsed his mouth. He shook his head like a dog, sending water drops flying, and dried his face on his shirt.

"Would you like a handkerchief?"

"Don't need it," he replied curtly, and sat down on the steps of a slide next

to him.

All sullenness appeared to have vanished from the face behind the dripping bangs. Takaya stared at the electric lights in front of him for a while, then finally said to Naoe haltingly, "About my mother..."

"Eh?"

"Sorry. 'Bout everything."

Seriousness settled abruptly over Naoe's face, but his eyes immediately softened, and he replied, "Not at all."

Takaya had perhaps always wanted to say that word of thanks, but had never quite been able to spit it out.

"[Matsumoto](#) can't even compare to [Sendai](#) in size, so I never thought that I'd see her. It was a total

coincidence. Sheesh, I never thought that I was such a sorry guy, that I'd just go off like that."

You're the one who ran away by yourself."

"You don't want to look at the child you threw away, do you?"

"Because I'm the son of that good-for-nothing who made you so unhappy!"

Takaya sighed again. This was what people meant when they said that regret always comes too late. He hadn't even apologized for the cruel things he'd said.

(I'm always making mistakes like this—)

"I bit off more than I can chew, I guess."

"More than you can chew...?"

"Yeah. I act like I understand things even though I'm just a kid. I don't know why. That's why I failed when it counted. I pretend my head knows stuff even when my heart totally...in reality, I totally hated my mom."

She had borne enough. It wasn't her fault for running away. Because he had killed himself to say those things.

"I forced myself to act like I understood. That's why I went crazy."

Takaya's eyes were downcast as he pressed his shirt against his mouth.

"Was that not kindness?"

"No, it wasn't kindness. Miya is the one who's pretty much accepted what my mom did. But I'm the one who couldn't say 'I'm doing fine'."

Why did you have to leave and go looking for only your own happiness...

Takaya sighed. Maybe—

What he couldn't forgive was not that his mother had left them.

(But probably that she became a part of someone else's family.)

Which was to say that she hadn't particularly wanted to take them. Not that he really wanted it either, but he just—...

(I just...)

He sank into brooding again.

"Takaya-san," Naoe said next to him. And Takaya involuntarily smiled in self-derision.

"Come to think of it, I really should be happy for our mom, since I had her longer than Miya."

"But because you have more memories, it pains you more."

"..."

Takaya looked up at Naoe. There was at times a quality of restraint in Naoe's voice that held others at a distance, but Takaya knew that his words were born of his true feelings.

"You have probably been wounded more because you have had to protect your sister. So I think it's quite natural that you would carry more ill feelings."

"So it's my right? Even that outburst of anger against my mom?"

"They loved each other, didn't they?"

"..."

"Your parents?"

Takaya was silent, not even breathing for two heartbeats. Then—

"No, they didn't."

He abruptly turned his face away. —So he wasn't being honest.

Naoe was coming to understand that Takaya's character would not allow him to answer such a question honestly.

Then suddenly—something caught Takaya's eye, and he stood and walked towards the fence at the park's perimeter. In one corner, the green fence was covered with a riot of vines with distinctly-shaped leaves.

"Morning glories."

The vines were dotted with a multitude of skyward-pointing flower buds that would open when the sun rose.

"It's like they're saying that they're completely prepared to bloom tomorrow, hmm?"

"Indeed. They'll certainly bloom tomorrow even if there be rain or hurricane."

"What resolve. Once they've decided to bloom, they'll never change their minds. Isn't it interesting?" Takaya mused, rather like a child with an observation diary. Beautiful swirls ran along the outside of the long, thin, tight-twirled flower buds like the swirls of a snail's shell. The buds pointed steadily up at the sky, waiting to release their stored energy in bloom. They were flexible and soft as a person's skin to the touch, and mighty, somehow, as if they truly were full of resolve.

"Whatever comes, they're determined to bloom tomorrow morning," Takaya said, crouching down and lightly stroking a bud with the tip of his finger. "But I don't know if they decide that themselves or if it's simply what happens. Only a single morning—I wish I could make it clear."

"... Truly." Naoe looked up at the sky. "But it'll be all right. I can see the stars. It looks quite clear."

"The stars?"

Three bright stars formed a large triangle above them. Though it was exceptionally clear, only those three stars were visible.

"You really can see a lot more in [Matsumoto](#) , huh?"

"Well, naturally. Tokyo doesn't really have a true sky."

"Then where is it? The true sky?" Takaya looked up at the night sky with a faraway gaze. "My old man's parents live in this place called [Oomachi](#) at the foot of the Northern Japanese Alps, so when I was little I would

go there a lot. I'd look at the stars there—it was amazing, the number of stars you could see, and not just bits and pieces. I'm talking about a sky so full of stars that it almost looked like it could fall on you.

There were so many that it looked weird, and I remember being so scared

that I clung to my old man."

"The air at the foot of the Northern Japanese Alps must be wonderful."

"Yeah. But the greenery's been cut down for a while, so I dunno what it's like now. [Matsumoto](#) is still a city too, so it's pretty bright." Takaya squinted as if

searching for the other stars. " But it still has more than here. You can see the Great Dipper. Have you ever seen a shooting star?"

"A shooting star? Well, let's see, I *have* lived for four hundred years."

"Geez, you're no fun at all," Takaya huffed, scowling. "Meteor showers are amazing in the countryside. If you're there at the right time you can see them come streaming down. Sometimes they're so terribly bright that it makes your heart go weak. After you see them, you start to shiver. It's like this you've looked at something completely unearthly, and it's unbearable."

Takaya, normally so awkward with words, was somehow loquacious in front of Naoe. He was no longer self-conscious as he spoke, and Naoe, wanting

to keep that mood, did not interrupt him. Perhaps he provided the perfect accompaniment, for Takaya found it extremely easy to speak.

"Shooting stars appear for just a second, so you're really happy when you see them, like you've really been blessed with something. Because maybe you're the only person in the world to see it."

"Then if two people see it, it would be a peerless treasure," Naoe commented, and Takaya's head swung to look at him. "That was not a double entendre."

"Heaven forbid."

"But truly—..." Naoe said, looking at the 'Great Summer Triangle',

"It's wonderful to be able to find that person who's irreplaceable to you, isn't it?"

(Irreplaceable—...)

Takaya's face dimmed—he appeared to be thinking of his mother again.

"..."

Gazing at Takaya's profile, Naoe silently removed an envelope from his jacket's inner pocket and extended it towards Takaya.

"What's that?"

"Something your mother asked me to give you."

Takaya took it dubiously and extracted the contents. In the envelope was a simple card.

"I should have given it to you the day before yesterday, but we were so busy that I couldn't find the time. I'm very sorry that it's late."

When he opened it, he saw, below the printed and decorated words 'Happy Birthday', Sawako's gentle, dearly-missed writing. It said:

*Happy seventeenth birthday.
My precious Takaya,
I pray always
that you may live in happiness.
From Mom.*

(Oh—...)

"I guess that should have been on the twenty-third," Naoe said quietly.
"Your mother remembered."

Takaya remained silent.

In a corner of the card was a black pushbutton. Naoe pressed it with his thumb, and a simple, tinny melody began to play.

The 'Birthday Song' echoed in the dark park.

After the last note faded, Takaya slowly looked at Naoe. Naoe looked back at him and gave a little nod.

"Happy birthday."

Takaya's gaze fell to the card once more.

He'd never imagined that he might receive birthday wishes like this. He himself had clean forgotten about his birthday. And his mother had remembered that he was turning seventeen...

His mother's precious words, seen again after so long...

(Ah—...)

They instantly blurred.

Dammit, he thought, ducking his head, but when he closed his eyes, the tears overflowed into droplets.

Naoe had probably seen, but said nothing.

The weakness of his tear glands was deplorable—he couldn't keep doing this, Takaya thought, sinking into a crouch and resisting with all his might.

As if to give him privacy, the morning glory buds all craned their heads to look up at the sky.

Since it was past ten, the traffic along Yasukuni Avenue was quite light.

Though it was summer vacation, it was still a weekday in the middle of the week; there were few businessmen out for amusements, and the night streets were empty.

They had gone a long way on their evening walk. Naoe had intended to call a taxi, but Takaya seemed to want to keep going on foot. Naoe had certainly gotten his walk.

They'd covered a lot of the distance to the hotel. Takaya seemed somewhat tired as well, and the nostalgia had faded from his expression.

He abruptly said, "Kagetora had a family too, didn't he?"

Naoe took a good look at Takaya after the surprise had worn off of this unexpected subject.

"Kagetora was an adopted child, right? Of Kenshin. He came from the

Later Houjou Clan."

"... Takaya-san."

"Odawara or something. He was the son of Houjou Ujiyasu , I think. Since the Sengoku generals are returning in the <<Yami-Sengoku >>, is he one of the ones who's resurrected, too?"

"The Houjou?" Naoe's voice lowered slightly as he replied

heavy-heartedly, "Yes. I was planning to tell you, but... The Houjou are now the strongest onshou in the Kantou , and are currently expanding their power. We've observed particular restlessness from them since the beginning of the year, and are hastening our investigations."

"Are they fighting?"

"At Kawagoe . Houjou Ujikuni was involved."

"Ujikuni?"

"Third son of Houjou Ujiyasu . In other words—" Naoe said, his face grave, "Your true brother, Kagetora-sama."

"My—brother."

He could not feel the truth of that statement—not surprisingly, since he had no memories at all. Naoe looked at Takaya with compassion.

"They are opponents we will one day need to destroy, the Houjou," Naoe said, remembering pain as he did so.

As long as Takaya could not yet feel that pain.

But the word 'brother' seemed to echo endlessly inside him. Takaya murmured haltingly, "I wonder what kind of people they were?"

"Kagetora-sama."

"These people once related to me by blood. My brothers—what kind of people were they?"

Aniue ...

Gazing at [Kita no Maru Park](#) submerged in darkness, Takaya thought of those cherished people whom he couldn't yet recall.

Saburou...

A gentle voice that he couldn't yet remember.

Come home...

Takaya look down.

To the [Sagami Sea](#) ...

Naoe finally flagged down a taxi after that. The distance was short, but perhaps due to a lack of customers that day, the driver looked happy to take them.

But just as they arrived at the hotel, Takaya and Naoe encountered some

completely unexpected visitors.

"Onii-chaaaaan !" A young woman came running towards them from the back of the lobby, and Takaya's eyes widened. "Onii-chan , I've been waiting for you to come back!"

What the.

Standing there was his younger sister, Miya.

"Wh-why the heck are you here?"

"Hey, there you are, Takaya!"

The familiar voice startled him, and he looked up to see Narita Yuzuru.

And also, coming up behind him with his right hand raised—

"Yo, General! We've been waiting for you."

—was Chiaki Shuuhei.

Takaya and Naoe stared at each other, flabbergasted.

"Naoe. What the hell is this?"

"Well, I really have no more idea than you..."

"Onii-chaaaaan !"

Miya flew into Takaya's arms.

"Woah! Hey, what the heck happened? Why are you here?"

"Since it was summer vacation, Narita-san invited me to come along with

him to Tokyo, and we drove here in Chiaki-san's car. Because we heard that you were here."

"Wh-what the! Hey, Yuzuru, what's with this impulsive...?!"

"It wasn't impulsive. I just came to buy some stuff," Yuzuru answered quite calmly.

"Stuff you can't get in [Matsumoto](#) ?"

"It really isn't any of your business, is it?"

"You guys!"

"Look, look, [Onii-chan](#) ! Chiaki-san bought these clothes for me in [Shibuya](#) !" Miya cavorted with a large paper bag in her hand. Takaya glared at Chiaki balefully.

"What the hell is that about, you bastard."

"Nothing at all, we were just shopping. You can't get the brand I chose in [Nagano](#) ."

"And you brought them here for this?!"

"[Onii-chan](#) , look, look, this rip!"

"Don't show off things like that, Miya!"

"All right, all right. Anyway, Takaya, have you finished up everything here?"

"You should know better too, Yuzuru!"

Naoe pressed a hand against his forehead as Takaya, Miya, and Yuzuru

continued to clamor next to him. Chiaki approached, grinning.

"What is this all about, Nagahide?"

"I was worried because you were so late coming back."

"The work is done. But you didn't have to bring Yuzuru-san and Miya-san along, did you?"

"Can't really be helped. Narita was kicking up as much fuss as an old maid—'isn't he back yet? isn't he back yet?' He called every day. And I didn't know if *he* was depressed or something. And besides," Chiaki added in a low voice,

"I was afraid you'd snap if you were with Kagetora too long."

"What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Nothing much. It's a hard job protecting the royal brat."

Naoe gave an amazed sigh, his eyebrows lowering.

When he was with Miya, Takaya's face was every inch that of a big brother

"Oh yeah, Onii-chan ,

you got an express delivery," Miya said. Naoe, knowing that they would likely not be able to return immediately, had send Sawako's present by express delivery to Takaya's house.

"There was a lot of stuff in it, like bamboo fish paste and bean paste rice cakes and teacups for both of us. Onii-chan , you saw Mom, right? Oh, that's so wonderful, I wish I could've seen her too," Miya said with complete innocence.

If he were so honest, he thought, a complex mixture of resentment and love churning inside him. Takaya smiled bitterly and tousled Miya's hair lightly.

"Waah, stop it, you're messing up my hair!"

"Takaya, here." Yuzuru lifted the grocery bag in his hand to show Takaya. "I bought fireworks. It's your birthday, right? I thought that we could celebrate with this."

"Fireworks? Here?"

"Yeah. Isn't there anywhere we can set them off, Naoe-san?"

"Fireworks, hmm? Let's see, there's a park near here."

"Great. Then we'll do it there. Let's go, Takaya."

Yuzuru and Miya pulled Takaya back towards the entrance. Takaya looked over his shoulder at Naoe as if he wanted to say something, but—

Chiaki grinned his usual grin. "All right, let's have a little fun.

There's no stopping them now, so guess I'll go get a bucket?"

Naoe sighed in amazement. "Then I'm going back to my room. I'll see you later."

"Hey, hey! We can't play with fire without a guardian around, right?"

"Guardian?" Naoe turned, and Chiaki threw him a 100-yen lighter.

"Come with us."

"Waah, they're so pretty!"

Miya seemed to like the sparklers. Chiaki and Yuzuru had more fun setting off the flashy sky-launchers, but Miya favored the hand-held fireworks from the family set. She frolicked with them in her hands, drawing pictures in the air.

"Don't wave them around so much, Miya."

"Aaah, it went out! Onii-chan , the lighter!"

"Wait, lemme get it...Ow!"

Naoe watched the exchange between the Ougi siblings from a small distance away. Takaya's gallant attention to his little sister was somehow charming.

(He must have been like this since he was a child,) he thought, strangely happy.

Takaya walked over to Naoe, shaking his hand.

"Feh, I burned my hand."

"Are you all right?"

"That 100-yen lighter is useless. It gets hot too fast."

"We should have taken a candle. Are you not going to set off any fireworks?"

"...Thanks," Takaya suddenly said, and Naoe's eyes widened. "For dinner earlier. It was delicious. I haven't thanked you yet."

"... I'm happy that you enjoyed it." He smiled. "I will always be here to support you. So please lean on me whenever you wish."

Takaya gazed at Naoe in all seriousness.

Then the usual sullen expression returned.

"You're a weird guy."

Naoe laughed. "I was just looking at the stars. With the trees hiding the light of the city, you can see many more. This was the way the sky looked when you were born."

"Yeah, I guess so. I heard that I was born around midnight."

"Midnight?" Naoe said, slightly surprised. "I see... Then—"

"What's with the 'I see'?"

Naoe smiled wryly as if in surrender. "Then you were born directly below the cross."

"The cross?" Takaya gave him an openly dubious look. "What the heck is that?"

"The Cygnus. —More accurately, a part of it. When you were born, there would have been a cross-shaped constellation right above you. It's called the Northern Cross, facing the Southern Cross in the south..."

Looking at the so what? expression on Takaya's face, Naoe smiled distractedly.

It was a bit difficult to explain.

(To be born beneath the Cross...)

Yes, he thought. It suited him with almost frightening exactness.

But the significance of this symbolic coincidence probably could not be explained outside of Naoe's mind.

(I should probably keep quiet about it—...)

"What? Stop keeping it to yourself. It's irritating," Takaya demanded an explanation in annoyance.

"It's a secret. Something that no one but I should know."

"What the hell? You really piss me off when you're like this."

Takaya gave him the usual angry upward glare.

"Wonderful eyes," Kokuryou had said admiringly, and it was true. His eyes held all the force of his soul. Even if they were narrowed in a furious glare, to be the sole focus of those eyes was bliss beyond words. If it were possible, he wanted those eyes to look only at him always.

The radiance in those eyes had not change these past four hundred years no matter how much the body had changed.

But Naoe had always thought midwinter was more suited to those eyes

than midsummer.

A clarity surpassing any season, glittering with the most radiant light in all the frozen night sky—

(A midwinter star.)

Takaya's eyes suddenly widened in surprise.

For Naoe's left hand had lifted as if to touch Takaya's chin as he returned Takaya's gaze.

"Nao—..."

"Onii-chaaan !"

Naoe returned to himself at the sound of Miya's voice and drew back his hand in surprise.

"The fire went out! Where's the lighter?"

"Uh? ...Aah," Takaya said.

Naoe handed him a lighter as he was about to turn. It was a heavy, expensive-looking thing. Takaya gave it a try, and it emitted a flame with a woosh. It was an internal combustion-style lighter.

"Is this really okay?"

"I think that will be easier to use."

Takaya looked at Naoe in befuddlement for a moment, but the corners of his mouth finally turned up in a smile.

"Thanks."

A cool night wind blew through the park. The sound of fireworks and light and joyful voices...

Takaya's gentle eyes as he looked at his sister...

Naoe reached for a cigarette as he stood watching over them. He had raised it to his lips before remembering that he had given away his lighter. He returned the cigarette to its box with a wry smile.

One with the eyes of a midwinter star, born in July...

(Ougi Takaya.)

Naoe closed his eyes against what began to pulse little by little within his breast.

The longer he was with Takaya, the stronger he felt the premonition that he would once again arouse that pain. He knew it, and yet.

The power held within the bud called Takaya, this bud on the verge of blooming, was hope.

(I want to believe—) Naoe thought, looking at Takaya's profile. (That the bud holds hope—...)

Let's go see those morning glories tomorrow morning, Takaya had said.

Naoe had nodded gently.

The July night deepened.

A star had been born beneath the heavens' Cross.

One July night.

END

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